

## CENTER MASS

### Chapter 10

Nash couldn't exactly describe the noise that woke him up. He was a light sleeper and always had been, but his wife slept like the dead. Once asleep, there was nothing she could hear.

He nudged her. "Are you awake?" he whispered. He may have gotten a mild curse word from her in response.

Damn, he thought. He would have to get up and check out that noise. That is when he heard the second one.

It was definitely the sound of shattering glass and whispering voices. He flew up, instantly alert, and went into action. Only one thing fully occupied his thoughts: he must protect the woman he loved.

Recently, he had begun to keep one of his pistols under the mattress. It posed difficulty when the kids were visiting, but he had pushed it far underneath so they couldn't find it accidentally.

That was always the fear – what would happen if one of the kids stumbled on a loaded gun? Well, they wouldn't stumble in this house. Not if he could help it. All but one of his firearms were carefully locked in a safe in his garage. The one that wasn't, a heavy Magnum revolver he used for both target-shooting and hunting, was right here under the

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mattress in his locked bedroom.

Nash was not the paranoid kind, but recently there had been a rash of invasions of homes belonging to retail managers in Southern Jersey. The managers were taken hostage and forced, at gunpoint, to go to their stores and access the cash for the thieves.

There had been two cases of this. Even a bank manager's wife had been taken hostage while her husband was made to open the bank vault so the thieves could unload the money.

After the voices and the breaking glass, Nash was glad he had stowed that gun under the mattress. He reached for it as quietly as possible, but he now knew there was someone in his house who didn't belong there.

Urgently, he thrust his hand farther beneath the mattress, fishing around for the reassuring touch of the revolver, and came up empty. Reaching for his wife, he rolled her gently off the bed on the side away from the door.

“What the hell!” she fumed, jolted suddenly awake.

Flipping the mattress on top of her, he grabbed the evasive pistol and crept silently around the mattress, crouching behind it. He listened in the darkness, consciously trying to still the sound of his own breathing.

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Next to him, his wife struggled to understand what the hell was happening. Gently, he shushed her, seeking to alert her to the danger.

“Shhhhh..... listen.”

Then she, too, heard the faint, scuffling sounds coming from the hallway. Someone was coming.

Thank God the bedroom door was locked, Nash thought. It was a habit they had gotten into with so much company about. No use having one of the little ones catch you in a compromising position.

Slowly, as they watched, the door knob began to turn. He felt his wife's hand close on his arm.

Apparently, the intruders had checked the other two bedrooms and made their way down to the end of the hall. Now, they were standing just outside the door. Whoever was out there had fallen utterly still. Silent.

Nash could feel them. He swore he could hear the strained sound of their breathing, even through the door, but it was probably the rush of adrenaline cooking through his system. He had to calm down and quick. Taking a few deep breaths, he felt his steadiness return.

Nash had never messed around when it came to guns. He wanted them to hunt big game, and he wanted powerful weapons – hence, the .44 Magnum.

No, he was *not* a Dirty Harry fan ... well,

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maybe he was, a little ... but he wanted a powerful handgun and the Magnum was the most powerful there was at the time. He didn't target something alive very often, but, when he did, he wanted to be effective.

He bought the Magnum when he was a teenager, in the early Seventies, with the help of his father, who couldn't understand for the life of him why his son needed such a powerful and difficult handgun to shoot. Nash had simply replied, "Because I can."

The gun was now loaded with 6 high-powered, 240 grain, jacketed bullets – very hot stuff – but he hoped to just be able to scare off whomever was in the hall.

To be sure, he carefully checked the cylinder. The gun was loaded and ready to go. He set himself with the mattress as a shield, and readied himself, in case the door was breached and they were attacked.

Nash urged his wife lower to the floor and raised the large gun, aiming it steadily at the door.

"I am armed and you better hit the road!" he yelled into the stillness of the room. His voice sounded loud, even to his own ears.

And, since he was about it, quite a bit more profanity and other expletives followed. He was now more pissed than scared.

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The distinct metallic workings of what Nash recognized as automatic weapons answered him. The intruders were armed.

Suddenly, the entire door seemed to explode inward in a hail of gunfire. Splinters of wood and a barrage of bullets smashed into the room.

Incredulously, his mind raced. Thank God, the bed was to the left of the door when you entered from the hall. The rounds tore up what remained of the door and blasted the hell out of the bathroom, behind the bedroom, but came nowhere near the mattress where the two of them were hiding.

Nash was glad, he hadn't headed to the bathroom, unarmed and seeking safety. He and his wife would have been in the direct line of fire.

At the thought, more adrenaline kicked in and he rose up, Magnum in hand, and readied to fire. His grip was rock-solid steady.

The first shot went wide to the right and hit the door frame – a warning shot about shoulder-high.

A loud curse issued from the hallway and Nash thought he heard something hit the floor, yet the firing continued. He paused for a moment, listening for the sound of retreat. He heard nothing.

Dropping down, he fired three aimed shots through the center of the door and, instantly, the shooting from the other side stopped. He heard what sounded like footsteps fleeing down the hall, but he

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decided not to follow.

Nash slumped back against the wall, near his wife, with the magnum trained on the door in his now-quaking hands. He was out of practice.

No matter how skilled a person was, no matter how calm, whether shooting at big game or doing what he had just done, he realized, the shakes generally followed once the adrenaline rush was gone. He had experienced this before and was able to calm himself quickly now.

Old habits never died. Maybe he wasn't so out of practice after all..