

Bolting awake, she couldn't be sure if something was out there, or if it was an aural hallucination. That happened to her relatively frequently. When her doctor told her she had exploding head syndrome, the infamous scene from David Cronenberg's *Scanners* flashed unbidden in her mind. She started to freak out, but only calmed when he explained it's just an exaggerated name for a condition where people hear noises as they fall asleep or wake up. This had caused her some problems over the years, since she sometimes dealt with dangerous individuals who wanted her dead. More than once, she thought someone was about to lunge at her from the darkness as her eyes shot open, and she felt silly when she had her gun trained on nothing but empty space.

Just to be safe, Madison never dismissed the noises. Keeping her breathing quiet and straining her ears, she listened carefully for confirmation one way or the other. She silently crawled out of bed and drew her pistol from the holster hanging on the back of her chair. There was a nearly imperceptible shuffling noise in the living room. It sounded like someone was attempting to sneak through the apartment. She moved to the door and turned the knob slowly, trying to avoid rattling the hardware. Once Madison retracted the door latch, she pushed it open just enough to peep through.

The living room and kitchen were dark, but she could see the shape of a figure rummaging around the bookshelf against the wall. Only the top and middle shelves had anything on them, since a large cinder block took up the bottom, holding up the sagging middle shelf to keep it from breaking. It was like that when she snagged it from the curb one night a few years back. It held a collection of files and documents about her years-long investigation into Jason's murder. She didn't think anyone would be interested in that case out of the blue, so she suspected they were looking for whatever she had about her current case. Aiming her revolver at him, she flicked on the light and yelled, "Freeze, dirtbag!"

The figure whirled around in surprise. Madison could see he was a young man with a very fresh beard. It was just wisps of hair on his chin, upper lip, and patches across his cheeks. His arms shot up above his head, and he cried, "Wait! Don't shoot!"

Madison never got a chance to reply. A metal baseball bat connected with her gun, sending it flying out of her hands. Fortunately, she was quick enough to duck beneath the follow-up swing at her head. She cursed herself for not checking the entire apartment before revealing herself. It was a rookie mistake, most likely brought on by the remnants of grogginess upon waking up so suddenly. At least her adrenaline was pumping now, sharpening her senses and reflexes. The assailant's next attempt to batter Madison was a body blow, but she kicked the small table beside the sofa at her attacker, forcing him to pull his weapon back and use it as a shield.

"Nice try, but that did nothing," the man said mockingly.

He didn't realize it wasn't meant to hurt him, just buy some time. In those intervening seconds, the private eye dove forward, scooped up an empty beer bottle, and popped back to her feet in one continuous motion. Before he could react, she slammed the bottle into his skull. It didn't shatter like in the movies, but it hit him hard enough to knock him out. The other intruder initially stayed where he was, assuming his buddy with the bat could easily take an unarmed woman in nothing but a flannel shirt. No weapons, no protection—it should've been a cinch. As soon as she dodged the second attack, he jumped into action. Although he couldn't reach his buddy before Madison knocked him out, the intruder tackled her to the ground moments after her victory.

The man had her pinned, kneeling on her chest, and he aimed his fist at her face, bringing it down on her. She crossed her arms, protecting herself and deflecting the blow. Madison nearly bent herself in half, hoisting her legs up and using them to trap the assailant's head with her calves. She locked them together and used the centrifugal force to yank him backward, sending him flipping head over foot into the back of the couch. Having freed herself, she was back on her feet in a flash and delivered a devastating kick to the man's unprotected groin. He cried out in pain, curling up into the fetal position and clutching the family jewels. She retrieved her gun and held it on him as she walked backward into her room, grabbing the phone on her desk and calling the police.

When they got to Madison's apartment, the intruder who had been knocked out was just regaining consciousness. The first officer to arrive took one look at the scene and burst out laughing.

"You boys look like you need a drink. Didn't your daddies ever teach you not to tango with a redhead?"

Madison had yet to learn if that was an actual idiom, or if he was just making it up on the spot. Lillian entered a minute later, and the officer helped the other new arrivals cuff the intruders and haul them away. The private eye didn't like having the police in her home, but Lillian was the exception. She'd been there half-a-dozen times over the last year. That was half-a-dozen times more than anyone else. As she strode around to survey the scene, her face fell with each new piece of broken furniture she saw. Finally, she stopped in front of Madison, placing her hands on her hips in a stance that indicated she was disturbed by the state of the apartment.