

CHAPTER 16

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It was after ten o'clock when Kit locked the front door and pulled it closed. It was unusually cold for December, the temperature already plunging below freezing. A full moon had already risen and was so intense that the snow reflected its brightness, illuminating the front lawn almost like afternoon.

She began to slip on the ice-covered cement. Instantly Carter's firm arms grabbed her and kept her from falling. He kept his arm protectively around her as they made their way down the sidewalk. He was so firm footed his shoes must have been made from tire treads, while she continued to slide along.

Once she was seated, Kit watched silently as Carter closed the door behind her. She noted that the windshield had been replaced, but the damage to the front fender had not been touched. She decided against asking him about it. A flash of light caught her eye, and she turned in the direction of her neighbor's house. Lisa had the curtains pulled back in an upstairs bedroom, and was watching them. As Kit's eyes met hers, Lisa dropped the curtain.

Carter and Kit were silent as they headed east toward Route 1, each engrossed in their own thoughts. Kit still

hadn't heard from Frank. Not a single phone call. She wondered if he'd spoken to his office, and if he was aware that his affair was out in the open.

She glanced at Carter. And now here she was, going to meet her son's kidnappers with a man she barely knew.

He must have felt her looking at him; he half-smiled and grasped her hand.

"It's going to be alright," he said softly.

With her other hand, she tightly held the compact disk that would be the key to her son's freedom. "I know," she answered with more conviction than she felt.

Route 1 was known as Jefferson Davis Highway along this stretch, and was normally covered with bumper-to-bumper traffic at just about any time. But tonight it was deserted, except for the occasional police cruiser and snowplows. Kit thought it looked surreal.

They drove past Beacon Mall, its neon lights bright against the snow, the parking lot empty. Even the Krispy Kreme was closed, the "hot donuts now" sign dark.

They reached the First Virginia Bank, and Carter paused while he shifted the vehicle into four-wheel drive. Their parking lot hadn't been cleared; it looked as if more than two feet of snow had fallen. Their eyes met. Both of them had noticed it: tire tracks leading from the street through the lot and past the night deposit box.

Across the street, a police car was stopped beneath a light, the officer watching the road crews. He turned his head in their direction. They stared at each other for a brief moment. The officer adjusted his glasses and peered at them with more than a little curiosity.

"We're not doing anything wrong," Carter said, his lips barely moving. He stepped cautiously on the gas. They felt the snow crunching under their weight. They circled the front of the bank and turned toward the night deposit box.

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Kit glanced in her side mirror. The police car was still sitting there, but she couldn't see the officer clearly. Was he still watching them?

Carter turned on the interior light.

"What are you doing?"

He stopped at the night deposit box. "Open your purse, act like you're getting something out," he said.

Kit complied, her hands clammy as she rifled through her purse, while he reached through the window to the stash of envelopes. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he reached toward the back and pulled out an envelope—and a neatly folded note.

He handed them to her; the note slipped into her lap as she slid the envelope across her purse and held it up to lick it. Then she closed it and handed it back to him. He opened the drawer and deposited the empty envelope, pushed the drawer back into place, and started out of the lot.

Her fingers shook as she opened the note.

"Don't hold it up," he said. "The cop's still watching."

"Head south," Kit said.

As they moved away from the officer, she read out loud, "Turn left at Roy Rogers. Go one quarter of a mile. Stop at the parking lot. Get out and walk to the building. Come alone. Leave the reporter behind."

Roy Rogers was a fast-food restaurant less than three minutes away, the kind of place Kit had taken Tim when he was younger, but for some reason she couldn't remember now, they hadn't been to in years.

Carter made the left turn, and promptly pulled into a gasoline station.

"What are you doing?" Kit asked.

"Getting a cup of coffee. Or appearing to."

Kit nodded.

"Get out, come around to the driver's side."

"I can slide over—"

“Do what I tell you.”

She got out and half-walked, half-slid to the driver’s side, where Carter was waiting with the door open for her. She climbed inside and adjusted the seat.

“I’ll give you ten minutes. Then I’m coming after you.” He closed the door before she could reply.

Without looking back, he walked to the door of the station’s convenience store, which was open but deserted, and stepped inside. Through the window, she could see him approaching the counter, his shoulders squared.

She put the vehicle in gear and turned onto Mount Vernon Memorial Highway.

She glanced at the odometer. “One quarter mile,” she half-whispered.

She’d been down this street before, especially when family and friends came to visit. At one end was Mount Vernon, the plantation home of George Washington; at the opposite end was Woodlawn Plantation, the home he’d given his daughter when she married. They were roughly three miles apart. They had once been part of Washington’s plantation, divided into a handful of farms, but were now littered with subdivisions and the urban growth of the DC area.

It seemed as if she’d never reach the quarter mile point, and she was beginning to wonder how Carter would ever get to her through the snow and the slick streets. She doubted if he would hear her screams for help, if she needed him. She was on her own.

Her mouth was dry, her lips parched. For all she knew, she was driving straight into their hands. She might be joining Tim, Joan—and Bernard.

She glanced at the compact disk, now lying on the front seat. What am I doing? But in the next instance, she knew: she would do whatever it took to get Tim back, even if it meant going into a lion’s den.

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There was a street light at the quarter mile mark, and a small turnaround where a plow might have stopped on a break. She pulled off the road and turned off the engine.

There wasn't another vehicle in sight.

On the other side of the road was a solitary building. From the light cast by the moon through the naked trees, it appeared to be of brown brick, a chimney rising high at one end but with no comforting smoke to indicate a fire within. In fact, it appeared deserted.

Kit hesitated. What if this were the wrong place? What if the kidnappers were waiting somewhere else, and she was here, waiting for them?

She looked at the odometer again. One quarter mile, exactly.

She peered down the street in both directions. There was nothing even remotely close.

Grasping the disk, she opened the door.

The street had been cleared but with the plummeting temperatures, the thin layer of slush left behind had turned to a slick layer of ice. Halfway across the street, she began to slide. She jerked backward, then forward in an effort to keep from falling, her movements catapulting her across the road. She slammed against a wooden sign, dropping the disk into the snow.

Frantically, she knelt down, her gloved hands searching for the all-important disk. At last, she felt it against her fingertips, and pulled it out, wiping it dry against her coat.

Slowly, she used the sign to pull herself up. Her coat had brushed off part of the snow that had accumulated on the face of the sign. Roiling clouds obscured the moon for a brief moment; then with a flash of light, it emerged and illuminated the sign: George Washington's Gristmill.

She felt her face freeze in fear and trepidation. So this was the gristmill, undoubtedly the same place Joan and Bernard met Toy at precisely this same hour, a lifetime ago.

She peered through the darkness at the building. Now it had a haunted quality, the darkened windows were sunken eyes, the smokeless chimney sinister against the sky.

She trudged through the snow to the door. A new padlock was in place.

As she stood there, holding the padlock, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck bristle, as if something was behind her, breathing down her neck. Her heart was pounding so hard her chest hurt.

Slowly, she turned around.

“Kathryn Olsen?”

The voice came from a short distance away. The only time she could recall being referred to by her first name was as a child, when she'd committed some unpardonable sin that her parents were sure would land her at the gates of hell.

The trees cast long silhouettes across the ground, reaching like tentacles from the edge of the woods to her feet. Something moved quietly in the shadows—a figure, tall, with broad shoulders. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, dark gray. His raised coat collar obscured his neck. The gloom cast by the collar, the hat, and the trees shrouded his face in darkness.

“Yes,” she said, her voice sounding stronger than she felt. “I’m Kathryn Olsen.”

When he reached her, he calmly pulled the padlock from her with a leather-gloved hand. With one swift movement, it was opened. “Were you followed?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“We were careful. No one knows I’m here.”

He opened the door and motioned her inside.

It took a moment for her eyes to become accustomed to the black interior. The walls were brick or stone, she couldn't tell which in the dark—and they seemed to close

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in on her, causing her to shiver as much from fear as from cold.

The door closed behind her. She turned as the man switched on a flashlight and fumbled at the door. He was locking them in.

She wanted to brush past him, to begin screaming and try to make her escape while she still could, but she stopped herself with every ounce of willpower. No one would hear her screams. She had no bargaining power. She still gripped the disk tightly in one hand; in the next instance, he could shoot her and he would have the program and she would be dead. And there would be no one left to rescue Tim and Joan—if they were both still alive.

Her heart was pounding so loudly that she was certain the man could hear it. Her breathing was labored, the cold causing her short puffs of air to enshroud her in a thickening fog.

He turned around and cast a light onto wooden steps. "Follow me."

She glanced at the door. The padlock was in place on this side of the door now. That meant he held the key.

He climbed a few steps and stopped, not bothering to turn around. His coat looked more like a cape from behind.

Kit took a deep breath and made her way to the staircase. He waited until she began to climb the stairs before he continued, the darkness of the wood and stone seeming to swallow them up as they ascended.

They were standing on the third floor. As cold as it was, he opened a window, fastening it in place with a wooden peg. When he turned toward her, she caught a glimpse of a squared jaw and hawk-like nose. His eyes were still obscured by the brim of the hat; she wasn't sure if she wanted to see them anyway.

He turned off the flashlight and slipped it into his pocket.

“What do you have for me?” he asked.

She held out the disk.

“What is it?” he asked, his hands firmly planted in his coat pockets.

“It’s the program, the one you wanted.”

“How do you know it’s the right one?”

She swallowed. “It’s the Chinese code.”

“How did you get it?”

“Never mind that. I got it. That’s all that matters. Now where’s my son?”

He chuckled. “Hold it up, so I can see it.”

She held it in front of the window. The light cast by the moon reflected off the gold cover.

He reached toward the disk, seemed to pause just short of touching it. With a slight chuckle, he took it from her.

“Has anyone missed your laptop?” he asked.

She hesitated. “No.”

“No one has questioned you about it?”

“When do I get it back?”

“It has some very valuable information on it. Information we can use. Information the CIA would be hard-pressed to explain, if they find out we have it.”

“Keep it,” she said abruptly. “Just let my son go.”

“Don’t you care what happened to your friends Joan and Bernard?”

The wind had picked up, causing the room to suck in the chilly air like a person inhales when frightened. Kit shivered uncontrollably. With the window open, she could throw herself through it. The snow would break her fall, and if he didn’t have friends waiting outside—

“They double-crossed us,” the man answered evenly. “Don’t play games with us. You’ll have a better chance of staying alive.”

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“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He placed the disk into a pocket on the inside of his coat. Kit noticed his weathered brown leather gloves. He had long fingers. He had no hint of an accent. He was an American, not Asian. What could he possibly want with Chinese code?

She watched as he calmly loosened the wooden pegs and closed the window. The darkness closed in around her like a casket slamming shut. She struggled to adjust to the darkness.

She could hear him, hear the brush of metal against metal. She was a fool to come here. She could never have bargained for Tim’s life; she was at their mercy. And now they had separated her from her only ally, who was probably drinking a hot cup of coffee a quarter of a mile away.

She lunged through the darkness. She had to get out of here, to get away from this monster before he killed her. Her shoes slid across the wooden floor, now damp with melting snow from their clothes. In one moment, she was sliding across the floor and in the next, she was airborne, her feet frantically trying to find solid ground, her arms flailing as she plummeted down the stairs.

She landed on the next floor with a solid thud, the breath knocked out of her.

She heard a chuckle above her. She hastily came to her feet as he shone his flashlight in her face. She raised her forearm to protect her eyes from the light, her other arm groping in the darkness for anything that could be of use.

“Don’t be an idiot,” the man said as he deliberately descended the stairs.

Her hand closed around a metal pole of some sort, and she ripped it away from the wall as he neared her. “Get away from me,” she snarled.

He stopped. In the darkness, he appeared to be assessing her weapon.

The flashlight was no longer pointed into her face. She studied him as she stood there, the metal pole pointed toward him as if to impale him if he stepped toward her. He held the flashlight in one hand. His other hand was calmly resting in his pocket. How would she know if he were going for a gun? He could shoot her right through his coat, and she'd be dead before she could react.

"You're not going to kill me to get back the disk, are you?" he said calmly.

She didn't answer.

"You did make a backup, didn't you?"

She remained silent. This wasn't what she'd expected. But then, she hadn't thought far enough ahead to know what to expect.

She hoped in the minutes that had ticked by, that Carter had been able to make his way toward her, that he'd spotted the Expedition parked across the street and was able to follow her footprints through the snow to the building. Maybe he was waiting just outside the door, waiting to clobber this guy when he opened the door, to whisk her away to safety—

Or maybe he was still drinking a cup of coffee and waiting for her return.

Maybe her fate was in her own hands.

"Where's my son?" she asked in a firm voice.

"You'll never know, if you attack me with that thing," the man said. "Now will you?"

She noticed for the first time that he was shuffling his feet, inch by painstaking inch, moving toward her without raising his feet, quietly and methodically coming closer without a sudden lunge or rapid movement, but in another instant he would be upon her.

She jabbed the pole in his direction. His right hand was outside of his pocket now, his left still holding the flashlight. She felt a cold sweat trickling down the back of her neck. If she jabbed again, she'd better be prepared to penetrate right

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through his body, or he'd be likely to grab the pole and yank it away from her—and use it on her.

“Where’s my son?” she repeated.

“He’s waiting for you,” the man answered calmly. She wished she could see his eyes, but they remained in shadow.

“Where?”

“In front of the main gate at Mount Vernon.”

“If he’s not there, I swear to God I’m coming after you,” she hissed with more conviction than she felt.

“You’ll never know if you don’t let me open that door, now will you?” he answered.

She hesitated. He was right. She was standing between him and the door, and the door was padlocked. And he held the key.

Then the flashlight was turned off and they were encased in blackness.