



VENOM by JOAN BRADY

Chapter One - SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

'David?'

'Yes.'

'You know who this is?'

'Yes.'

'You're alone?'

'Yes.'

'Get out. Now.'

There was a slight pause. David looked into the living room. The pale cotton curtains were closed across the patio doors; a light wind billowed them out toward him.

'How many guys are there?'

'One.'

'Who?'

'He's a professional, David.'

'Size? Build?'

'For God's sake, what does it matter? Just get out. Right now.'

David Marion snapped his cell phone shut. When it had rung, he'd been in the kitchen of his house, folding sheets with the military precision that comes from years as a convicted man in a prison laundry. His cupboards showed the same influence: a couple of cans each of peaches, Heinz spaghetti, baked beans, spam, an aerosol of Reddi-wip. He shook out a pillowcase, tossed this whole store into it—except for the Reddi-wip—carried it to the entrance hall, set it beside the door and went back to the living room.

It was the end of March, an unexpectedly warm night in the Midwest; people had windows open all along the close where he lived. He shut the patio doors behind his curtains. Then he turned on the TV, lit a cigarette and sat down to wait.

But David was hardly a man at ease watching a TV quiz; he still had the Reddi-wip clutched in his hand when he heard a gentle knock. He balanced his cigarette on the edge of the ashtray and went into the entrance hall.

'What do you want?' he said irritably through the front door.

'I'm really sorry to disturb you,'—the voice was frightened, wavery, old—'but I saw your light. My wife—'

'I'm busy.'

'I got to get her to emergency. You got to help me.'

'Call an ambulance.'

'Oh, come on, mister. Please help us. Please.'

David sighed, more irritably than before. 'Give me minute.' He turned the key in the lock and leaned wearily against the door while he slid back the bolt. The abrupt pressure from the other side was all he needed to know. He yanked the door open.

Any type of aerosol—even whipped cream—is a substitute for mace. Before the guy on the other side of the door recovered his balance enough to aim the gun in his hand, the Reddi-wip blinded him. He dropped the weapon. David kicked it off to one side, grabbed the pillowcase of canned food that he'd set there half an hour before and swung hard.

The man staggered, sank to his knees. Blood spurted from his nose. David swung again and kept on swinging until the pillow case ripped apart and cans of spam and peaches rolled away across the floor. They clattered against the far wall. He stood there a moment, breathing hard, covered in blood, furious, outraged, affronted.

Pretending to be a scared old man is an internet cliché.

He knelt beside the guy spread-eagled on his floor. The face was too much of a mess to give away much, but the springy hair and the young body suggested early twenties, a big kid, almost as tall as David himself, one of those iron-pumped prison bodies like David's too. A stretch inside should have taught him better than to try such a stupid trick.

David left the body where it was, and went to the garage for paint thinner and fertilizer. He dumped both into a bowl with a jar of Vaseline, kneaded them into a dough and wrapped it in Saran wrap. Candles came next. He cut the wax away from a dozen of them, tied the wicks into a long string, warmed them in the oven while he ground the heads of half a box of matches, then rolled the wicks in the ground-up residue. Packing the rest of the match heads into the spring from a ballpoint pen was a delicate job; it took several toothpicks and forty minutes. He placed the entire assembly—string, spring and dough—near his front door.

There wasn't more than a couple of hours of darkness left when he emptied the kid's pockets, got out of his own blood-spattered clothes, showered, dressed. He checked over the living room, bedroom, kitchen the way tourists check out a motel where they've spent the night, except that he was checking it out in reverse: vital things such as car keys and house keys had to be left behind. His luggage was a plastic supermarket bag; he tossed a couple of spare tools into it along with the contractor's gun and pocket contents.

Then he took out his lighter, lit the string of candle wicks and left, shutting the front door behind him.

He hadn't found any keys on the man, but he knew the cars of this respectable neighbourhood; the elderly Volkswagen stood out like a blood clot on a wedding cake. The kid had been so sure of himself that the keys were still in the ignition. David slid into the driver's seat and started the engine; he'd reached George Washington Boulevard when the thunderclap of the explosion hit. He braked, as any ordinary driver would, and twisted around to watch the flames, white in the centre, red at the tips, licking up into the night.

Vaseline and fertilizer make as good a bomb as any terrorist might hope for. Lights in houses nearby flipped on, a few here, a few there. A second and third blast came almost together, throwing out streaks of red that scarred the sky and boiled up to join forces with an already fierce fire. A wail of sirens began in the distance, only to be drowned in further explosions.

Where David's house once stood, an inferno billowed and soared.