RETRIBUTION

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Steve squinted into sunlight glaring off the polished hood of his sleek compact as he drove down the manicured boulevard of his hometown. Bright blooms of begonias and petunias peeked above the carpet of cropped grass.

Steve whistled along with his music. His discharge from air combat missions in the Middle East brought him back to his safe life in the foothills town of Parkerville. Devoid of tourists and jetsetters, it offered a family atmosphere quieter than nearby Aspen and Vail in the higher elevations.

He parked in the lot of a corner convenience store to assuage his addiction to Oreos. A two pack a week man, he’d depleted his supply. His tour of duty had left him lean, and after being deprived for four years, a few binges didn’t seem unreasonable.

An ancient Olds idled in front of the glass doors. Steve stepped past it and entered the store. The scent of coffee and pine-scented cleaner greeted him. The handful of times he’d been inside, he’d never seen the floors muddy or the merchandise dusty. Whoever, owned this place was lucky enough to have an employee who possessed a work ethic.

His quest for the cookie aisle turned him towards the check-out counter. His heart caught at the sight of a tall, young man with cold blue eyes holding a gun on a Vietnamese clerk, who’d probably come over for a better life. Behind the creamy Formica counter, the clerk stood white-faced and taut, eyes wide with fear. The Caucasian gunman with spiked, bleached hair towered over him.

Keeping the pistol on the clerk, he spoke to Steve. “Stay back or I’ll waste this guy.”

The warning wasn’t necessary. Steve had stopped moving as soon as he’d spotted the pistol. He’d seen guys like this, their mental unbalance obvious in the crazed look of a druggie needing cash.

Steve glanced around. The store was deserted. No one would either help them, or become a third hostage. He was glad of the latter.

The gunman shoved his pistol to the clerk’s temple. They looked odd together, tall white boy and middle-aged Vietnamese. All they had in common were the beads of sweat that bubbled on their foreheads.

“The money. Now. You understand?”

He pressed the gun into the man’s skin.

A rivulet of perspiration trickled down Steve’s temples. He possessed a black belt in Tae Kwon Do. He’d been in plenty of competitions. Yet, kicks and punches, even well-placed, were no match for a gun.

The clerk’s hands shook as he shoved the money from the register into the paper bag. When he finished, the gunman scowled, obviously disappointed with the take.

“That all you got? What kind of place is this? Where’s the rest?”

The clerk shook his head. He was panting too hard to speak.

Finally he managed, “No more.”

“You have more. You have a safe. And you’re going to open it and hand over the cash.”

When the smaller man swayed, Steve feared he would pass out. Instead, he managed to say, “I don’t know how to open it.”

The gunman narrowed his piercing eyes. “You better learn fast because we’re going to that safe and if you can’t unlock it, you and your customer are going to die.”

He waved the weapon at Steve. “Follow him. And don’t try to be a hero ‘cause I’d just as soon shoot you as not.”

Steve followed the clerk to the back of the store. The crazed druggie with a gun at his back made his flesh crawl. It would be ironic if he escaped being killed in battle only to come home and have this maniac blow him away.

The clerk led them to a cubicle that served as an office. It housed an old-fashioned floor safe, gray, with chipped paint and a rotary dial.

“Nothing inside.” The clerk insisted. “Emptied yesterday afternoon. Owner hasn’t come today.”

“I’d like to see for myself,” the druggie replied.

The clerk held out his hands in a helpless gesture. “Please, I already tell you. I don’t know the combination.”

“Then I guess this is an unlucky day for you and this clown.”

He aimed the pistol at Steve’s chest. Steve’s heart thumped as though it would break his ribs. He had no doubt the crazy meant what he said. Consequently, he had to act. What was the worst that could happen since he was about to die anyway?

He moved fast to side-stepped and grasp the man’s gun arm, wrenching it upwards and back as a shot squeezed off and lodged harmlessly in the wall .Steve twisted the gun away as he’d practiced a thousand times with fake weapons. Apparently, it worked equally well with the real thing.

He stepped back, pointing the gun at the assailant. The man’s expression changed from surprise to fury. He poised as though he might spring for the gun.

“Don’t do it, man,” Steve warned. “Stay where you are. I’m no more afraid to shoot you than you were to shoot me.”

Steve’s pulse raced in time with his pounding heart. Though he didn’t relish it, he would kill the guy if he had no choice.

The young man sank to his knees, shaking so violently Steve wondered if he might be having a seizure. Nonetheless, he didn’t take any chances by intervening. He stayed back and handed his cell phone to the clerk “Go up front and call the cops.”

The man bolted from the room while Steve focused on the robber who had stopped shaking and was banging his head against the vinyl floor, shouting obscenities so loudly Steve doubted they’d hear the sirens when the police arrived.

Nerves on edge, Steve waited, cringing each time the robber’s head went down. He tensed, wondering if the gunman would try and bolt when shouts from the police announced they’d entered the store. The clerk spoke to them rapidly, as they neared the back room.

Two uniformed men rounded the corner with weapons drawn. Steve set the pistol on the floor and kicked it out the door. “Back out and keep your hands where we can see them,” one of them instructed.

Relieved to be out of the confined space with a crazed druggie, Steve obeyed. When the assailant was cuffed, the older policeman said, “I’m Officer Davis. If you’ll come with me, we’ll get this sorted out.”

He led Steve to the front counter to talk. Outside, a ring of police cars with flashing lights kept curious onlookers at bay.

After giving his account of what happened, Davis thanked him, adding, “You and the attendant will have to come in for statements. And your testimony will be needed when this goes to trial.”

Two policemen led the robber through the store. Though the fight seemed to have left him, his eyes narrowed when he spotted Steve. The silent hatred chilled Steve more than if he had unleashed a barrage of threats. He watched the man’s retreating back as they steered him through the door and loaded him into a patrol car.

“He’ll have a history of prior arrests,” Officer Davis told Steve and the clerk. “His type always does.”

While the officer escorted Steve and the clerk to the patrol car for the ride downtown, the press tossed questions. Ignoring them, Steve hoped to keep his name out of the paper and avoid being hounded.

No one spoke on the way downtown. Pink blooms on ornamental plums, crimson tulips, and buttery daffodils seemed surreal after what had just happened. The peaceful aura of spring, with lazy clouds in a baby-blue sky, didn’t belong in a morning filled with violence. Hadn’t he left that behind him when he left the military to come home? This town was filled with family folks like his sister, Megan, her husband and two kids. Crazy gunmen had no place here.

They reached the red brick building that housed the police station. Steve’s palms grew damp as they parked in the lot. Though he’d never been arrested, he had an irrational fear of finding his picture on a wanted poster. His look alike, or a twin he’d never known, would be his undoing. And if he took a lie detector test, he felt sure he’d fail, not because he was guilty, but because he would *feel* guilty.

They walked up the sidewalk into a hive of activity as suspects were trotted through a swinging half-door. Steve’s escort stopped to speak to an officer whose desk was nearly hidden under paperwork. The phone rang incessantly

A secretary bestowed a smile at Officer Davis. “You guys took down a robber, I hear.”

Davis nodded. “He’s already in custody.”

He gestured toward Steve. “This guy got him.”

She shifted her attention to Steve with a look of admiration that made him feel ill at ease.

“Wow, a hero.”

“Not really,” Steve said, “Just lucky.” Battle experience had convinced him that heroes were buried with pomp and ceremony, but buried just the same.

To his relief, they continued to the back room where he gave his statement to a man seated behind a small desk. He repeated exactly what had happened while the officer typed up the report. When he finished, the typist swiveled to call into the office behind him.

“Hey, Dana. We think we have the guy who’s committed those robberies.”

“Really?” a woman called back.

A moment later, she appeared in the doorway. “Why do you think so?” she cast a curious glance at Steve.

“This guy took down a druggie who was trying to rob a convenience store. He fits the profile.”

She studied Steve. “That’s impressive. Our guy was always armed.”

“He had a gun and he was ready to use it,” Steve admitted. “I had to take a chance or die.”

She pursed her lips, looking doubtful. Though she wore no hint of lipstick, Steve found the curve of her lips attractive.

The officer introduced them. “This is Dana Morales. She works in the violent crimes unit. And this is Steve Yarrow, our apprehender. He has a black belt in Tae Kwon Do.”

“Ahh,” she said. “A black belt. That explains how he got the gun.”

She didn’t look overly impressed, just satisfied with the explanation.

Intrigued, Steve studied her. She could hardly have been more than five foot two, was trim, yet too curvy to look boyish in her gray uniform. Her figure, combined with her heart-shaped face, delicate nose, and large dark eyes, made her distinctly feminine. Her dark auburn hair was plaited in short French braids that left her forehead bare, revealing a widow’s peak at her hairline.

He watched her elegant brows rise with interest as she read the report. Handing it back, she said, “If you weren’t trained in self-defense, he probably would have killed you. Someone shot and killed a clerk a couple of days ago. I hope this is our guy.”

He wanted to have solved the crime. Listening to her made him feel as though it was his responsibility.

“They’re booking him right now,” the officer said.

“I’ll grab Louis. We’ll go over and talk to him,” she said.

She dismissed Steve without a backward glance that left him strangely disappointed even though she was understandably engrossed by the robber’s apprehension.

The officer filled Steve in. “Louis is our boss. He’s the chief detective.”

He glanced over the report, seemed satisfied, and printed it out. “We’re all done here,” he told Steve. “I’ll give you a lift back to your car.”

As they rode to the convenience store, Steve called the community airport where he had an interview to become a mechanic. He was appreciably late, but considering the circumstances, he hoped to be forgiven.

Fortunately, he was in luck and the supervisor agreed to see him when he could get there. This good-will might mean they were short of mechanics, or perhaps they trusted Steve’s story, which he hardly believed, himself. Either way, he wouldn’t have his whole morning shot.

The officer dropped him at his car, and asked, “Ever thought of joining the police force? We could use a cool-headed guy like you.”

Steve shook his head. “No, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

As he clicked his door lock, he knew no force on Heaven or earth would lure him into a job where he felt like a duck in a shooting gallery. He’d had enough of that for a lifetime. He wanted peace, stability and safety, fun times with his nephews and the rest of his family. All the trappings of a suburban life. He wanted a quiet life, to meet a nice girl and get married. The American dream. Maybe he’d even get a small dog to lie at his feet.

As he headed to the interview, he tried to put the morning out of his mind. What surprised him the most was that it wasn’t the robbery that occupied his attention. It was the pretty crime investigator he’d briefly met.

He parked in the airport lot, feeling at home. A plane took off, giving him a wave of nostalgia. He hadn’t flown with Pop since before his tour duty. Perhaps they could get in a little flight time soon. But first, he’d give Pop’s plane a thorough going over.

As he parked the car and walked past the tinted sliding doors that led into the main building, he caught a glimpse of his reflection. Fortunately, he’d looked worse. He was shaved and neatly dressed in cargo pants and a navy, cotton polo shirt. He’d had his hair trimmed and had even persuaded his cowlick to lie flat. Though the job didn’t depend solely upon his appearance, he’d learned that first impressions were important. He owed the military for demanding the display of self-assurance, even when it didn’t exist.

Yet he had a right to confidence. With his dad’s help, he’d gotten his pilot’s license when he was sixteen. He still flew upon occasion, though his real interest lay in the mechanical maintenance of planes.

He found the freestanding office of Vince, the mechanical supervisor. Steve knocked on the door and heard an invitation to enter. Vince sat behind a worn desk that was piled high with papers. He was stout and barrel-chested, with a reputation for being a demanding boss with a short fuse. Steve could live with that. He’d endured a drill sergeant and an exacting commanding officer. He could survive Vince, as well.

Vince rose half-way out of his chair and stuck out a beefy hand. “You must be Steve. I’m glad you could make it.”His words lacked sarcasm.

“Thanks for seeing me. I didn’t expect to be involved in a robbery.”

“Just something that suddenly comes over you, huh?” Vince asked.

Steve looked at him, confused, and then realized he was joking. “I hope I would have been smarter than that robber,” Steve replied.

“Missing a few brain cells, was he?”

“Drug induced, I think,” Steve said.

“That’s one thing we don’t tolerate here,” Vince said, taking a serious tone.

“I don’t do drugs,” Steve replied, wondering if he should confess to a serious addiction to Oreos.

Vince nodded in approval. “Glad to hear it. There’ll be no worries about you passing the drug test.”

He riffled though some papers, frowning until he found the ones he sought. “You have good credentials. I don’t see how I could go wrong with you. Come take a look at the planes. Then, if you want the job, we’ll set up the preliminaries for employment.”

Steve nodded, surprised by the ease with which he’d been hired and wondering if there was a catch somewhere. Except for the robbery, life had fallen neatly into place since he’d returned. His family was well. He had a nest egg of savings.

This chain of good luck seemed to verify he’d been right to leave the service. Though he was grateful for the training, and a military career had appealed to his sense of adventure, he’d missed civilian life. Ultimately, he’d decided not to re-enlist. And now, he’d been hired for the job of his choice.

He tried to concentrate as Vince droned on about engines that Steve had worked on for years. After awhile, Vince’s monotone became background noise.

They toured the hangers that housed the three airlines operating out of the airport. Unlike the private airport with Pop’s little Cessna sitting next to one that belonged to a local real estate tycoon, this airport flew mostly Beechcraft C90GT, a more powerful version of the C908. Steve pictured the internal workings of each plane and went through a mental check-list of a safety inspection.

At last, Vince asked, “Well what do you think? You want the job?”

Steve realized they’d finished the tour.

“Sure.”

“Can you start within the week?”

“Tomorrow, if you need me.”

Vince nodded. “Sounds good.”

He looked up, studying Steve. “What keeps you from becoming a commercial pilot? You’d make more money.”

Steve shook his head. “I like working on planes. Flying is strictly for fun.”

Vince looked a little doubtful. “Okay, I don’t interfere in other people’s business, but, you know, with your hours of flight time, you could do better than this.”

Steve couldn’t help smiling at Vince’s disclaimer. “Trust me. I know what I want.”

“Your life, kid.”

After he filled out some forms, Steve decided to head over to see his folks. They’d be pleased by his news. A nice safe job. His mom had been none too thrilled about his decision to join the Air Force and downright distraught when he’d been shipped overseas. The fact that Pop had been less vocal had spoken volumes about his worry.

Though he’d been gone only four years, things had changed. He remembered his initial surprise to discover Main Street had been expanded to four lanes during his absence.

A few miles past the mall, he turned left onto a winding paved road that led up to the hilly, middle-class subdivision where his parents lived. Xeriscaped yards reminded him rain was scarce in Parkerville and water expensive. Folks who liked to look at a green lawn took up golfing.

He passed houses of childhood friends. His mom had been quick to catch him up as to their whereabouts when he returned. He’d called up a few of the guys, had even gone out for a beer. And he’d come away feeling like an outsider. Whether truckers or corporate players, he couldn’t relate to their lives. Perhaps he was too soon returned from war. Still, talking over old times made him nostalgic. He’d called up the girl he’d dated during his sophomore year in college and asked her to go out to dinner. Though he had high expectations, it hadn’t worked out. He was honest enough to admit it wasn’t her fault. While his experiences had changed his world views in the last four years, Mandy’s had not. She was still a starry-eyed idealist who believed she could change the world. He was no longer an idealist. He’d seen the world, and knew that no amount of happy talk was going to convince the ruthless to become beneficent.

They’d parted, he and Mandy, each saying they’d had a wonderful time. He’d not called her again. He knew his decision saddened his mom, who’d always liked her. He’d already upset her by dropping out of college after two years. He hated disappointing her further. Perhaps, they’d both like the next girl he dated.

He pulled into the cracked and aging driveway and stared at the house. In spite of its thirty-some years, his parents kept it up admirably. A two story structure of brick and wood, it had a roof that overhung the porch. Downstairs, lay a large country kitchen, a family room, a library full of Dad’s airplane books and Mom’s sewing projects, and the master bedroom.

Upstairs, were two bedrooms separated by a bathroom in the hall. He smiled, remembering the occasional thunder storms that had sent him and Megan scrambling downstairs into their parents’ room for safety. He hoped, one day, he’d have just such a home where his children could run to their parents for comfort.

After he opened the front door with his key and stepped into the red-tiled entryway, he listened for voices. It was eerily quiet. In the room to his left, there was no hum of the sewing machine or of Mom’s singing along with her favorite CD’s. He peered inside the room to find it empty.

He moved through the family room into the kitchen. Dishes were strewn on the table. Dad’s newspaper lay in a crumpled heap on the floor beside his chair. Steve stared at the mess, puzzled. It wasn’t like either of them to go off and leave a mess. Their penchant for neatness caused them to barely survive their children’s teenage years.

He was struck by a sudden thought. Perhaps they were taking advantage of their empty nest with an expression of romance. It seemed unlikely. Yet he knew it was due to his preconceived notions. Children generally had difficulty imagining their parents in the throes of passion.

Though he would mortify himself and his parents if he was right, he stepped to the entrance of their bedroom at the bottom of the stairs and announced his presence. He had no choice. Even if this proved awkward, he had to make sure his parents were all right.

When he called to them and received no response, he moved cautiously into their room. It was tidy, yet empty.

He checked the sliding door to the living room and his worry edged up a notch when he discovered they’d left it unlocked. A deranged lunatic could have entered the house and murdered both of them. The motivation eluded Steve, yet he couldn’t tamp down his fear.

His heart thudded against his ribs. Only an emergency would cause them to leave in such a rush. Possibilities of a heart attack, stroke, concussion, kidnapping, or grisly murder flooded his mind. Cozy memories of childhood fled, replaced by war scenes.

His cell phone rang and he braced himself.

It was his sister, Megan. “I’m glad I caught you. Gramps is in the hospital with chest pain. It all happened about a half hour ago. I knew you’d want to be with us.”

He was relieved there’d been no murder. Yet he was concerned for Gramps, whom he’d worried about for months. It had been less than a year since his wife had died and the elderly man had never recovered. Though Steve understood his loneliness and sense of loss, he wasn’t ready to lose one of his very best friends.

“I’ll be right down,” Steve said, already in the doorway.

The regional hospital was no more than fifteen minutes from his parents’ house. He jogged to his car and sped onto the street. Fortunately, traffic was light and he made good time, even though it meant taking advantage of several yellow lights.

He arrived in the emergency waiting room to find Megan sitting alone. Their parents were in with Gramps. But the news was good so far.

“The blood test looked fine. They’re thinking it might be stress. He thought he saw someone prowling around the house,” Megan said.

“They’re keeping him for more tests though, right?”

She nodded. “They intend to be sure.”

He glanced around. “Where are the kids?”

“Lucy has them. She said she could keep them for a while.”

Lucy was Megan’s neighbor and best friend.

“I don’t want things to change, Megan.”

She gave him a quick glance. “What do you mean?”

“Gramps, this town. The people we know.”

She frowned at his tone. “Nothing’s going to change. Gramps will be okay.”

Megan, the eternal optimist, never failed to assume the best. Most often, she was right. Yet, this time, he had a feeling of foreboding he just couldn’t shake.

“I wonder if he really did see someone skulking around,” Steve said.

Megan shrugged. “He was on the phone with the police when the chest pain started. There was no sign of anyone when the police and ambulance arrived.”

“So you think he imagined it?”

Megan’s tranquil blue eyes clouded. “He’s been unsettled since Grandma died. Not really his old self. He could be growing paranoid.”

Steve sunk into a funk. There was nothing worse than seeing members of your family become shadows of themselves, succumbing to the time-induced ravages of body and mind. It had been tough enough that Grandma had lost feeling in her legs and her vision to diabetes. After he went overseas, Mom’s letters told of the torturous days when her kidneys failed. Steve had been out of the country when she died.

He wished he could go back to the way things had been before he left. Back then, Grandma would sit in her wheelchair at family gatherings, smiling at Megan’s toddler at play. She’d been a good listener, someone they all went to when they needed a sympathetic ear. He’d mourned the news of her death, feeling cheated that he’d not got to kiss her soft cheek one last time or tell her good-bye.

It was too soon to lose Gramps. Though he said he was ready to be with his beloved, Amanda, the family wasn’t ready to let him go.

Steve glanced up as his mother, an older version of Megan, entered the waiting room. Rachel carried herself with Megan’s ease of movement, transmitting a tranquil aura wherever she went. She was nicely rounded due to a flair for home cooking, and had vivid blue eyes that Megan had inherited, instead of the characteristic gray eyes of the males in the family. Though she was usually quick to smile, today she wore a frown.

She settled beside Steve and patted his hand. “Gramps keeps rambling about a burglar. He got himself so worked up, we had a hard time calming him down.”

“He likes my riddles. I could try to distract him,” Steve offered.

Rachel shook her head. “He’s on the way to another test. Dad went along for the ride upstairs. If it turns out okay, they’ll probably release him. We’ll keep him with us for a few days.”

“Maybe it’s time for him to live in a care facility,” Megan said.

Her matter of fact tone made Steve cringe. “He’d be miserable.”

“He’d be safe,” Megan said.

“He’s independent, like your dad,” said Rachel. “It wouldn’t be easy to get him to go. Fortunately, we can put off the decision until we see if he’s beginning to imagine things.”

A few minutes later, Rachel stood up to greet a tall, gray haired man who looked younger than his fifty-three years. She kissed his cheek and asked, “How’s Dad?”

“He’s settling down. I think he’s going to be all right.”

Megan and Steve gave their dad a hug.

Steve hoped it would be a long time before Pop was in the same situation as Gramps. Gramp’s side of the family had a history of long life. If that was any indication, both Pop and Gramps should be around for many years. That was, if Gramp’s mental health remained sound.

They waited together until the doctor came out to explain the results of the tests. It turned out that Gramp’s heart was sturdy as an ox, with no sign of either a heart attack or pending heart trouble. The doctor had decided to release him, seeming pleased that he was staying with Rachel and Charles for a few days.

Steve, relieved by the news, told his parents, “I’ll be at the house when you get him home. I haven’t seen Gramps but once since I’ve been back.”

“I’m going to get the kids,” Megan said. “Let me know how Gramps is doing.”

Rachel hugged Megan. “I will, honey. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

That spark of optimism gave Steve a pang of unease. Maybe it was having survived a crazed gunman in the morning or maybe it was just unsteady nerves from his military stint. Whatever, it was, it was proving hard to shake.

On impulse, he decided to drop by Gramps’ place on the way to his parents’ house. What if the old man had been right and someone had been lurking around?

Steve knew he probably wouldn’t find anything. Yet it would ease his mind to take a look.

CHAPTER TWO

Lauren stared at the balding man sprawled in a deep sleep. Disgusted by his paunchy, pale body clad in boxer shorts and a stained T-shirt, she wrinkled her pert nose. She loathed all the men she lured and pillaged, just as she loathed this gullible slob. Yet, from the moment he’d leered at her in the bar, she’d been confident of success.

Her modus operandi was to take the mark to a motel room and offer a spiked drink. It was rare when they didn’t accept the sedative-laced liquor. When that happened, she told them she’d changed her mind. And if they didn’t take no for an answer, she laid them out cold. Years of self-defense had prepared her to take care of herself. No one touched Lauren without her say-so.

She left the drafty motel room without a backward glance at the man on the bed. She was eager to get home to Kathy, who would be waiting up for her. She might not have Lauren’s looks, but she was a loyal companion, a hard-working nurse. They’d been together three years now. Lauren knew, when she grew too old to lure men, she could count on Kathy’s salary to see them through.

A light mist fell, sparkling on her fine, blond hair as she walked the few blocks to the bus stop and waited under the shelter, making her wish for her Camero that was in for repairs.

Deep fog shrouded the street lights and cast them in an orange glow, giving the city the ambience of an old horror film. Lauren ignored the vampire mood it set. Nothing coming out of the mist would be any worse than the monsters she’d already faced.

It was almost ten minutes until the bus arrived. Though she’d pulled her jacket over her shoulders, her short skirt and midi top left her chilled. She couldn’t wait to get to her warm apartment, have a glass of wine, and talk over the evening with Kathy.

When the rumbling orange behemoth finally came, she slipped inside and had her pick of seats. At this hour, most commuters were curled in bed staring at their television screens. All except the girls working the streets. Lauren appraised them as the bus passed dingy bars and adult book stores. In a few years, these women would lose their looks. And what would they have left? A few lousy bucks, most of which went to abusive johns?

She shook her head, wondering how they could let themselves be used when it was immensely more satisfying to use men and give nothing in return. Of course, there was the risk of being recognized by a former client. She rarely let it worry her. Las Angeles was a city with plenty of street corners and bars. So far, she’d been lucky.

Besides, if one of her victims did remember her, he wasn’t likely to go to the police. If he was married, he wouldn’t want trouble, and if he wasn’t, his ego prevented him from admitting he’d been taken.

She got off the bus at the corner of the apartment complex where she and Kathy lived. Kathy would be thrilled when Lauren told her they were going to Sunday brunch tomorrow, courtesy of the latest mark.

With numb fingers she reached the second floor and jammed her key in the lock. The gentle fragrance of cinnamon wafted from the interior. Kathy loved candles and kept them burning when she was home.

Lauren stepped inside and let the warmth envelop her as she closed the door.

Kathy lay curled on the beige sofa, wearing her fuzzy blue bathrobe. She looked like a plump kitten with frizzy brown hair and a round, pudgy face. She grinned at Lauren and flicked off the television.

“How was it?”

“Super. I made a little over three hundred in cash. And I’ve got a credit card that will buy us a fancy brunch tomorrow.”

Kathy grinned and her eyes lit with enthusiasm. “That’s great. I adore brunch. You’re fabulous at what you do.”

Concern filled her voice as she added, “I’ll bet you’re chilled. I don’t know how you keep from getting pneumonia with what you have to wear. I’m running you a warm bath so you can thaw.”

Lauren took a deep whiff of the apartment.

“I love being home. The streets are so dirty. A warm bath sounds heavenly.”

Kathy rose and ambled down the hall to the bathroom while Lauren went to the bedroom to fetch her favorite flannel p.j.’s with the cute calico cats. A warm bath and a little wine would erase the memory of her repulsive clients. And tomorrow, she and Kathy would celebrate.

The wine made her drowsy and it wasn’t long before she headed to bed. It seemed only moments after her head hit the pillow that Kathy’s insistent fingers tugged her out of her dreams.

She moaned and rolled over, trying to pull the covers over her head.

It was no use. Kathy pulled them back. “It’s nearly eleven o’clock. I believe there was talk of a brunch this morning.”

Lauren grudgingly came to consciousness. Kathy had a healthy appetite. It was surprising that she’d waited this long before insisting on a meal.

It was probably for the best. Lauren could use something to eat. Though she watched her figure closely in order to keep her appeal, she’d had only wine for dinner and she could feel the beginning of a headache.

She opened her eyes. “Find me something to wear and I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes.”

Kathy eagerly obliged, returning from the closet with a modest paisley pant set.

Lauren sat up and accepted it.

Kathy was dressed in beige pants and a black turtleneck. She didn’t look good in turtlenecks, since she had no neck. Lauren had never told her. She was too good of a friend to hurt her feelings.

Lauren slipped into her clothes and headed into the bathroom to apply the modest make-up she wore when not at work. Her blue eyes needed only a little shadow and mascara. Her blond hair was easy to manage. Cut short, it curled in wisps toward her pixie face. It was this combination of sweet face and athletic body that made her job so easy.

After she’d coaxed her hair into a shimmering, golden cap and brushed her teeth, she was awake and ready to party. She loved getting out in the morning, relished the warmth of the sun and rubbing shoulders with honest folk. It was a refreshing change from the people she dealt with at night.

Sometimes, during afternoons when Kathy was at work, Lauren took to the shops in Beverly Hills. She’d peruse the stores while she eavesdropped on customers as they discussed their lives. Afterwards, she chose a small outdoor café for lunch and observed the women whose lives differed so completely from her own.

Often, she would see a mother walk by with a small child in tow. At those times, she felt a pang of regret so intense that it nearly made her ill. She would avert her eyes and take deep breaths until she could refocus her thoughts. She could never change the past. Still, she wished she could find some magic that would squeeze it out of her mind. Since it didn’t exist, she reminded herself that she was strong. She would cope.

She heard Kathy sigh impatiently. Hurrying, she put a faint dab of beige eye shadow on her lids and added a quick brush of mascara to her lashes. Then, satisfied that she was good to go, she and Kathy headed to the carport to slide into Lauren’s sleek Camero.

They listened to the primitive beat of rock on Lauren’s CD as they drove. Lauren had been in L.A. nearly a year, having moved from Washington D.C., and then from Las Vegas. She’d’ have to move from L.A. eventually. Staying too long in a city, even a big city, could be dangerous.

The mild morning held no breeze to stir a sky gray with smog. A tiny shaft of sun pierced the pollution, refusing to admit defeat.

At the hotel, they left the car with the valet. Since this was the most expensive brunch in Las Angeles, Lauren intended to enjoy herself. Not only would she allow a rare splurge at the delicacy laden buffet, she would feast on the inanities of the rich and famous who attended such buffets.

More than anything, it was a treat to watch the elite eat. Women, on their never ending diets, picked at omelets while the men ate heartedly and ignored them, engrossed in either cell phone conversations or discussions with the other men in their party.

After Lauren and Kathy were escorted to a table near the kitchen, the waiter took their drink orders and invited them to enjoy themselves at the deliciously aromatic tables of food.

Lauren winked at Kathy. “I’m not dieting today. It’s not every day you get a brunch like this, compliments of a gullible client.”

Kathy’s smiled broadly. “I’m glad to hear you’re indulging. I don’t like pigging out when you don’t.”

She cocked her head, and added in a serious tone. “I still do it, mind you. I just don’t enjoy it as much.”

Lauren laughed. “I’m sure you don’t.”

They waded through the fashionable crowd to reach the buffet.

Lauren piled her plate with chocolate croissants and fruit, an omelet and a pastry.

She glanced at Kathy to see that she had a mound of food teetering atop her delicate ceramic dish. No stingy tidbits for the two of them. They were here to feast and feast well. Neither Lauren nor Kathy cared to impersonate society women, who would never pile their plates. The two imposters weren’t here to make either friends or a good impression. And, with the exception of a few curious glances, they were quickly passed over and soundly ignored.

They ate slowly, savoring every ripe, luscious berry and succulent melon. When they were sated, they lingered over coffee, rich dark coffee, with a hint of almonds.

“I’m stuffed. I won’t need to eat for a week,” Kathy said.

Lauren laughed. “You wish. We’ll both be hungry by dinner tonight.”

“I know. But let me cling to my fantasy.”

The crowd began to thin. Growing bored, Lauren said, “Let’s go to the park. I’ll bet the flowers are in bloom and we can walk off some of this food.”

Though not athletic by nature, Kathy agreed to a leisurely stroll.

Lauren signaled for the tab, smiling at Kathy as the waiter took the credit card.

When he returned, she leaned toward Kathy and declared, “I wish my husband could have joined us. He was called into surgery.”

Kathy stifled a laugh and nodded sympathetically.

They took the receipt and left arm in arm, giggling like schoolgirls.

Lauren’s cell phone rang just as the valet returned with her car. She glanced at the phone. Not recognizing the number, she hesitated before picking it up. She had no friends in L.A. except Kathy and no business acquaintances.

At last, curiosity got the better of her and she answered.

“Hello?”

The caller hung up. Just as she figured. Wrong number. Yet, for some reason, the call left her unsettled. Surely, the credit card company couldn’t have traced her so soon. She’d only used the card once and she didn’t intend to use it again. Still, her biggest worry was being caught, either by the police or by a client. She took great pains to be careful. Yet she always worried that her luck would run out.

She tossed the credit card into a nearby trash bin and joined Kathy in the car. She turned on the music and headed for the park, ready to forget her nagging worry. It was a gorgeous day. They’d had a delicious brunch. A relaxing afternoon loomed before them. Since things had never been better, she wasn’t going to ruin their fun with groundless worries.

They parked on the curved road that led to the park. The crowds had already arrived, surrounding them like an amoeba and engulfing them in families with babies in strollers and toddlers in tow, dogs leashed for walks, and couples of all ages. As they blended into the crowd, Lauren began to relax.

They tarried into the afternoon with Lauren enjoying Kathy’s delight in the varieties of roses and gardenias, hyacinth and hydrangeas, all in a glorious riot of pinks and blues and yellows and purples. Lauren indulged her since they were in no hurry to get home. They had the entire day to relax. Lauren never worked Sunday nights. Pickings were slim, with most of the family men spending their evenings at home.

They walked, rested on benches, and walked some more. Lauren wanted to get a house one day. She might get a respectable job, maybe in real estate. The money wouldn’t be as good, but she could quit moving. She could put down roots, maybe plant flowers in the yard.

It was long-term. Lauren believed she still had a few good years on the street. And she wanted to make them count, so she could live her dream when she was through. She was determined there would be no tiny duplex or condo for her. She would have a cozy home in a respectable neighborhood. And Lauren would look back over her childhood and know that none of it mattered. She would achieve success in spite of the odds. No one would ever look down on her again. She’d come up from the bowels of social depravity and perversion. And she’d survived.

One day, she would live among respectable families who kept their dark secrets, if they had any, hidden in their closets. She had no delusions about their perfection. She suspected they were as perverted as the drug dealers and johns. But they were discreet. And while she despised the discretion that allowed them facades of decency, she longed to bury the past and live among them. She would cultivate her image as a sharp business woman. Admiration and respect would be hers for the taking, along with admission into the refined society that had cast her out. This was what she desired. And it would someday be within her reach.

“Let’s stop off for tacos on the way home,” Kathy suggested.

“I thought you weren’t going to eat all week.” Lauren laughingly chided, loving the way Kathy took pleasure in the little things of life, scented candles, flowers, kittens and candies. She was chubby, and the chin length cut of her chestnut hair did nothing to dispel the roundness of her face.

“All this walking has made me hungry. I’ll eat them as an early supper,” Kathy said.

Lauren wasn’t the least bit hungry, but she would stop at Taco Bell and indulge Kathy.

Her cell phone rang as they headed for the car. A woman with a mid-western accent stated that she had obtained information Lauren had requested regarding her adoption history. She’d uncovered the birth mother and could give Lauren her name if she still wished to make contact.

Stunned, Lauren couldn’t answer. She’d waited over a year for this information. She’d begun to think she’d have to find a way to acquire it on her own. And now, when she didn’t expect it, here it was, set before her like lobster at a seaside café.

Finding her voice, she told the woman she’d like nothing better. She jotted the name and current address onto a scrap of paper and thanked the woman for her efforts. She clicked off and turned to Kathy.

“You won’t believe who just called.”

Kathy grinned. “Yes, I will. I was listening.”

Lauren stood on the curb, biting her lip.

“Well,” Kathy prompted, “are you going to tell me what she said, or not?”

Lauren shook herself free of the emotions that assailed her. “Of course I’ll tell you. Only promise you won’t tell anyone else.”

Kathy rolled her eyes. “Who would I tell?”

Lauren gave her a somber look. Kathy was wont to prattle to anyone who’d listen.

“Okay, but I really promise.”

Lauren told her what she’d learned.

“That’s wonderful. When will you go out to meet them?” Kathy asked.

“Maybe in a week or two.

Lauren expected her birth mother was happily settled. The last thing she’d welcome was a reunion with her daughter. The thought gave her amusement.

The phone jingled.

This time it held a text message. “You don’t mess around with Jim.”

She showed it to Kathy.

“Who’s Jim?”

Lauren shrugged. “I don’t know. It must be a wrong number.”

She remembered the hang up call she’d gotten that morning and wondered if there was a connection. Though it made her uneasy, she couldn’t imagine how either call could be a threat to her. No one had her cell number except Kathy and the adoption agency.

“It’s probably some guy’s jealous lover who keeps dialing the wrong digit.”

Kathy laughed. “Boy, did he get a wrong number.”

Lauren nodded a vigorous agreement. “You got that right. This girlfriend’s got no worries about me messing around with Jim unless he comes with a stash of dough in his wallet.”

They bought Kathy’s supper and headed home for a quiet evening. This appealed to Lauren, who was a homebody at heart, as was Kathy, which made them perfectly matched roommates. Neither liked to socialize. They preferred to stand on the fringe of life and watch the up and coming make fools of themselves. It was ever so much more amusing than joining the game.

They put on a movie while Lauren worked out. The down side was that the evening was nearly over. Tomorrow, the new week would begin. Lauren would sleep in while Kathy went to work. The cycle seemed endless. Yet, one day, Lauren would have enough money to do as she pleased. This was what she promised herself. This was what kept her going.

When the alarm went off at noon the next day, Lauren smacked the button to quiet it. She stretched languidly, cat-like and lithe before stirring for breakfast. After she’d eaten a bowl of cereal, she went into the bathroom to apply make-up to her deceptively innocent baby blues and comb her feathery hair toward her face.

She watched television until early evening and then dressed to go out.

Tonight, the weather was balmy. She had no need of a jacket. So she dressed in black leather shorts, black fishnet stockings and a pink satin shell.

As shadows darkened doorways and alleys, she became a black widow, preying among the weak and witless. From among them, she would get her evening meal and return to her lair before repeating the tedious cycle of flirtation, capture and sting. Yet, as long as it was lucrative, she would continue to hunt.

To the men she ensnared, she was no more than a delicious confection. Yet, once they were alone, she turned from luscious pastry to a confident conqueror. She was a lioness, a queen among the women of the street. And though she was sick of the tedium, there was satisfaction in her work. In righting the wrongs committed against thousands of helpless victims, she took from the gluttonous and gave nothing in return. This gave her tremendous satisfaction. And when she picked up her first mark within ten minutes, tonight promised to be as victorious as every other night. He drove by in a Corvette, wearing rings and a flashy bracelet, his dark hair carefully sprayed in place. His suede jacket impeccable, he oozed style.

She gave him her brightest smile, and after a quick negotiation, they headed for the hotel at the end of the block. They made small talk along the way. He said he was a dentist. She gave away nothing about herself.

When they reached the hotel, she waited while he checked in under a fake name. Once they were in the room, Lauren pulled out the bottle of wine she kept in her shoulder bag, found two glasses and “fixed” his drink to give him at least a four hour nap.

She curled her slender fingers around the glasses and admired the red polish on her sculptured nails. She thought it was ironic she could use these hands to lure and caress or to inflict crippling blows perfected from long hours of practicing Tae Kwon Do. She was faithful in attending class in whatever city she lived. It gave her release from the pain of her past and confidence in the present.

She brought back the drinks.

“I like to relax a little before… well, you don’t mind, do you?” she asked with a winsome smile.

“No. Of course not.”

The dentist was proving agreeable, eager to enjoy every moment of her company. She snickered at his gullibility since brief minutes of conversation were all he’d get from her.

The drug began to work and his head lolled against the headboard. He frowned as his eyes rolled back in the sockets. Then, he went limp.

Lauren dug eagerly in his pockets, extracting his wallet and hoping he was as well-heeled as the image he projected. She expected six or seven hundred. She found three hundred in twenty dollar bills. Disappointing, but it would have to do. The night was young. She had time for at least three more clients. Even if they carried only what he had, it wouldn’t be a bad night.

She pocketed his money and left without a backward glance. He’d not find her again. She wouldn’t work this street after tonight. And they’d be changing cities soon. He’d be out his money and his pride. This was her ultimate objective.

She felt smug as she returned to the street.

After two more takes similar to the first, she felt confident this was going to be a good night. When she added this money to the cash reserve in her safety deposit box, she’d be one step closer to her dream. She would live in respectable society. All it took was money.

Her last mark drove slowly beside her in his sedan before pulling to the curb. She glanced at her watch and decided she had time for him. It would be an hour before the first man would awaken. By then, she’d be long gone.

The man in the sedan cruised to a stop. He had jet black hair and pock marks on his face. He leered at her with eyes that were nearly as black as his hair. His shoulders were broad, making him look like the lumberjack that had once been on paper towels packages.

Disgusted, Lauren fought the urge to reject him. Then, she reminded herself that cash was all that mattered. She wouldn’t have to endure his company for long. And it was especially satisfying to fleece ones like this, ones who didn’t bother to hide the fact that they were swine.

They settled on a price and Lauren slid onto the bench seat of the sedan.

He said little, only glanced at her once or twice.

She watched his hands as he gripped the wheel. She’d learned she could tell a lot about a man from his hands. Soft pudgy hands meant a professional man who had a reputation to uphold. These men were never any trouble. Rough hands, hard hands, meant a man who lived and played tough. This guy had the roughest hands she’d ever seen. You never knew about his sort.

She let these thoughts trail off as they reached the motel. Lauren loathed low rate motels with their peeling paint and garish flashing signs. She wondered how often the sheets were washed and the floors were cleaned.

The man secured a room and drove them to the doorway. Lauren got out of the car and reminded herself that she wouldn’t be here long. Hygiene hardly mattered when all she would do was mix a drink and wait for the oaf to fall asleep. She’d be out before the germs had a chance to notice her.

She glanced around the room. It was compact. At the end of the double bed, a dresser left a narrow walkway. A few feet away, a tiny cubicle served as the bathroom.

Worn, plaid draperies matched the threadbare bedspread. The air reeked of smoke and no one had bothered to mend cracks that covered the walls and ceiling. Perhaps tremors came too often to make it worthwhile.

She forced herself to look at the man. He leaned against the dresser and studied her. Lauren bit her lip. She found his lack of communication unsettling.

“Well, when do I see what I bought?” he asked, lowering his lids. The effect produced a steely glint.

“I’d like to have a drink first. I always carry wine to make the atmosphere more upscale.”

She gestured toward the bathroom. “I’ll get the glasses.”

He stuck out his leg, blocking her path.

“I don’t think so.”

Lauren swallowed, fearing this was going to be difficult.

“I’m only asking for a drink,” she said.

He studied her from his narrowed gaze.

“I’m not thirsty.”

Lauren had known that, one day, something like this would happen. So far, she’d been able to get by most of her ardent clients by wheedling for a drink. The implacable tone of the pock-marked man told her it wouldn’t work.

“I’m only asking for a little romance. If you’re going to be like that, I might have to call this off,” Lauren said.

His blow caught her full in the mouth knocking her onto the carpet. She cursed herself for not being ready for this reaction. Yet, she recovered quickly. Instinct and training had her on her feet in seconds. Her sidekick caught the man full in the thigh, sending him crashing backwards into the doorframe.

He countered by coming at her with both fists. Lauren deftly avoided his punch. He was strong, yet slow and clumsy compared to her lightening kick that buckled his knees.

He went down hard.

As he rose, Lauren took a fighting stance in preparation to defend herself.

His face resembled a thunder cloud. Clearly he’d never expected resistance from this petite bit of fluff. He’d probably beat up plenty of street girls, and took perverse enjoyment in it. With guys like him, it was about dominance and power. Lauren had surprised him by fighting back.

She doubted he’d stop at subduing her and having his way. The steely set of his jaw told her he didn’t appreciate having his fun thwarted. The only way to get back his pride was with her humiliation, andpossibly, death.

She blocked his punch to her face and struck him hard in the throat. She made the most of her advantage and kicked out his knee, sending him down with a grunt of pain.

He grabbed at her ankle and she kicked him in the side hoping to keep him down. It seemed to her like she was fighting an ox. Instead of staying down, he grappled onto his good knee and pulled an eight inch knife from his pocket. The lethal blade glinted in the sunlight that seeped through the draperies.

Lauren cringed. She hated knives. Though she had faith in her defense tactics, it was hard to remove a knife without getting cut and cuts were a disability in her profession.

She jumped out of reach as he jabbed at her.

He got to his feet and limped towards her. Thankfully, he pointed the knife straight at her and not curled into his hand like men who knew knife work. Still, if she wasn’t careful, he’d manage to cut. And if she survived, she might never work the streets again.

She moved swiftly, sidestepping to pull his knife arm against her shoulder. Using his own weight against him she bent his arm to slash it backwards across his throat and then down into his stomach in one swift move.

She watched the shock on his face during his last moments of consciousness. He sank to the floor with his hand on his throat in a vain effort to retain his life blood.

Lauren stood over him, watching the liquid seep from his wounds and puddle onto the threadbare carpet. Now that it was over, she felt deep satisfaction. Killing had been fun, watching him die intriguing. She wished she could do it over again.

Perhaps she’d have a chance to kill again soon.

She used her shirt to wipe her fingerprints off the handle of the knife. She knew better than to linger. Someone might have heard the commotion and called the police.

She went through his pockets quickly and discovered he had less than the hundred dollars he’d promised her. She took what he had and gave him a scornful look on the way out the door. Here was one man who’d never beat up another girl. It had been a pleasure and an honor to take him down.

It was too late for another job. And truthfully, she wasn’t in the mood. She was exhausted from the fight. And though the odds were slim she’d pick up another pervert, she didn’t feel like risking it. Besides, she couldn’t wait to get home and tell Kathy what had happened.

Kathy would worry about the police. Lauren would assure her that there was nothing to connect her with the killing. No one had seen her with him. And she had no prior convictions or fingerprints on file. She’d be okay. Besides, she’d be moving to another city soon.

She walked the few blocks to where she’d parked her car. Sliding inside, she listened to her rap CD. She’d had it for years and it was still her favorite.

As she neared home, she got an uneasy feeling. She couldn’t put her finger on it and decided she was jittery from the fight.

Yet after she parked the car and climbed the stairs, her heart began to thud. Their apartment door was ajar. Kathy would never leave it open at this late hour. Either she’d left in a hurry or there’d been trouble. Either way, something was terribly wrong.