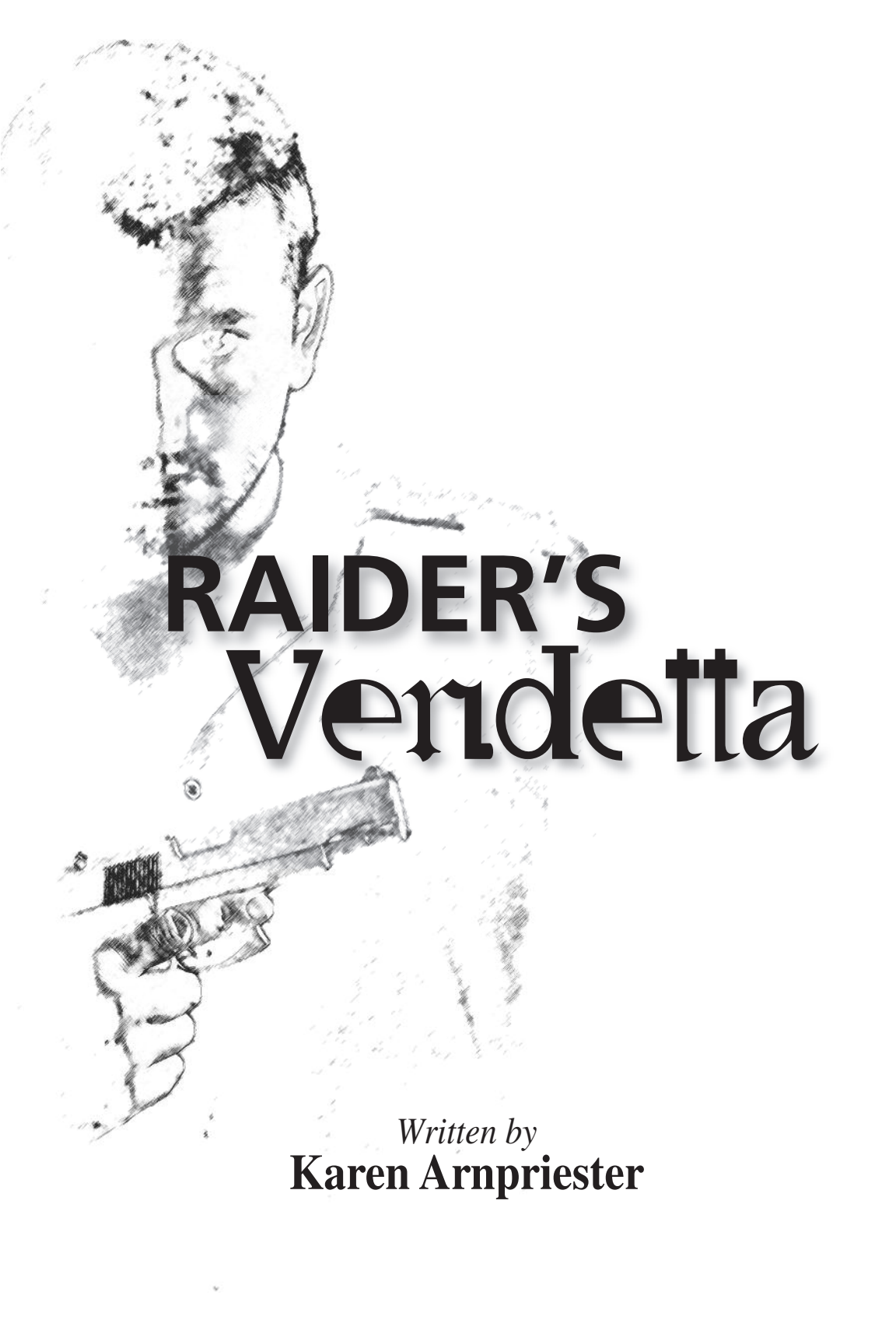
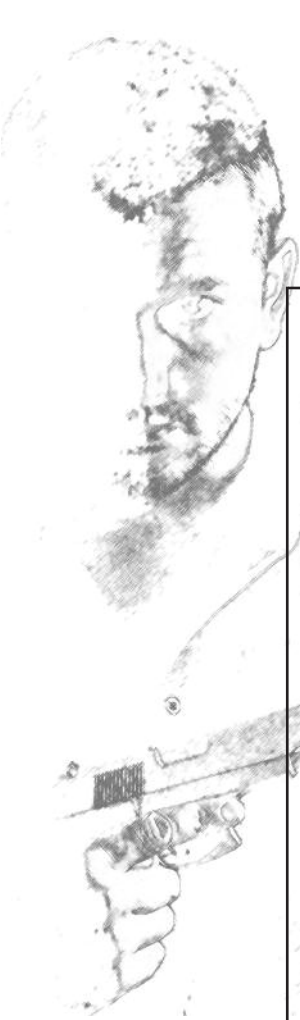




RAIDER'S **Verdetta**

Written by
Karen Arnpriester



Reviews

A surprising twist for this new and rising author, Karen Arnpriester, Raider's Vendetta has all the action and edge-of-your-seat suspense required to captivate and hold its audience to its spectacular and unexpected ending. I loved, hated and will not soon forget the main character, Raider. Is there hope for Raider? Is anyone beyond God's reach? Will Charley survive? This book I could not put down until I had the answers I craved. I was hooked from the beginning and am hooked on this author! I'm already anticipating her next release that I hear is pending. Put me on the waiting list!!!

Pam Rich

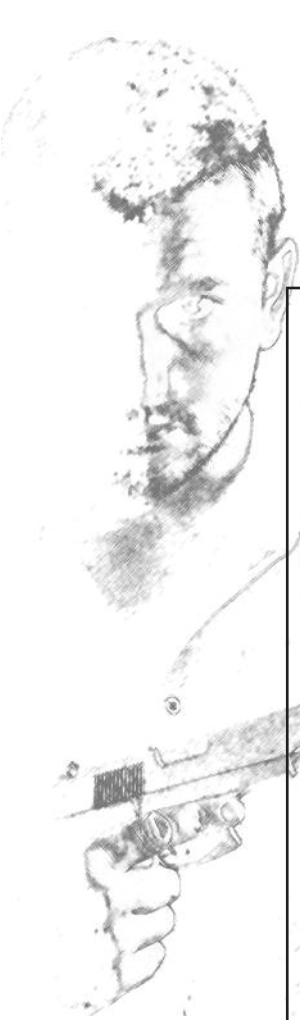
A Christian drama with twists and turns, two people's journeys of self discovery and life lessons through a harrowing event. Rich characters, action, and deep Christian experiences.

J. Locke

After reading Karen Arnpriester's first book, and heard another was released, I had to give it a read since the first book, I could not put down. Now, with Raiders Revenge, it picks up more velocity with a fascinating character study that had me hooked. There were many twists and surprises and the writing style had me hooked again. I highly recommend this book to any reader who wants to be lost into the story, and delve deep into the mind of her characters.

Bravo Karen.

Tom Allen



Introduction

I am thrilled to present my second book. Only the Lord knows how I ended up on this journey of telling stories. Stories about the pain life presents and the healing that can come from Heaven's grace.

As the writer of this story, I was able to step into the heart and mind of a very angry, vindictive person. Raider could easily be the type of person that we throw away, but the journey allows us to see how he became a man filled with fury. A man who could have been a loving, kind husband and father, but succumbed to a life of hardship and regret.

Charley, a faithful woman who would be tested and pushed to the ultimate limits. Could she follow God's directives and put her own pride, safety and fears aside?

The questions brought up in the book are and were my questions. Questions that kept me separate from God for many years. Some have been answered, but others have not, not yet. The story contains miracles, some fictional but others are actual Heavenly encounters that I was cherished enough by God to experience.

I would love to hear about your reactions and thoughts.

karnpriester@gmail.com

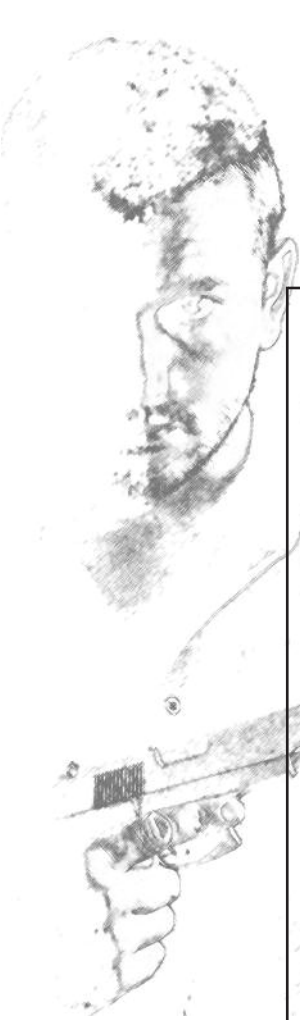
www.facebook.com/karen.slimickarnpriester

twitter.com/KarenArnpriester

amazon.com/author/karenarnpriester

Blog: <http://karenskconcepts.com/mythoughts>

raidersvendetta.com



Long Ago

He tried many times to escape, but Itchy couldn't figure out how to undo the latch from the inside. *How long will she keep me in here this time?* he wondered.

It was a simple mistake; he hadn't meant to see Mrs. Anton naked. Itchy was just hanging out with his best friend, Marty Anton. When he threw open the unlocked bathroom door to relieve himself, he saw her standing in the tub. She hadn't removed the towel from the bar yet and Itchy saw all of her nakedness. Itchy quickly looked down and fell backwards as he scrambled to get away. The screams from Mrs. Anton blasted his ears as he peed his pants. The uncontrolled release was horrific for a fourteen-year-old boy.

Mrs. Anton was enraged. She threw on her robe and telephoned his Aunt Rose, screaming that Itchy was a pervert and Rose needed to keep him away from her son. She insisted that he would corrupt Marty and turn him into a "Peeping Tom." Itchy panicked and ran from the house as Marty's mom shrieked at him to never come back.

Itchy was afraid to go home. He knew that his Aunt Rose would use his latest misfortune to punish and shame him, but if he didn't go home right away, the punishment would be even harsher. She had a way of stacking sins on top of each other. He could already hear her screeches in his head. "It wasn't bad enough that you lusted after a grown woman, but then you refused to face your foul sin and suffer the consequences. God sees your filthy heart. You can't run away from Him!"

When Itchy slunk into the house through the back door, Aunt Rose was waiting for him. She looked at his soiled crotch and clucked with distain. Itchy didn't

RAIDER'S Vendetta

understand that his Aunt had mistakenly assumed the worst. The wooden paddle that she used for pulling bread from the oven was spinning in her hands. He knew what was coming next – he unzipped his pants and they, along with his boxers, fell around his ankles. She nodded toward the kitchen table and he placed both hands flat on the surface.

The beating was vicious this time. He tried not to cry, but the repeated swings of the paddle became unbearable. The tears rolled down his cheeks and puddles formed on the table.

While he endured her wrath, she quoted scripture to him. She always pulled scriptures out of context and Itchy was convinced that God expected him to suffer to be worthy of forgiveness and salvation. Aunt Rose would alternate scripture with demeaning statements, telling him that his pain was only a small measure of what he deserved. He was born a bastard to a mother who was cheap and easy with filthy men. Aunt Rose would do whatever it took to save him from himself.

After Aunt Rose felt the punishment had suited the crime, she stopped and opened the cabinet door to the vegetable bin, an outdated storage area for fresh produce. It was the cell Itchy must endure until he repented for his wrongdoings. Itchy carefully pulled up his pants. There was no longer enough room to sit, as there had been when he was smaller. He had to squat, bend over, and squeeze in to fit. The blisters on his backside were on fire and wet. Itchy was sure they were bleeding. This was typical when she suspected his punishable infraction was sexually motivated, which was more frequent as he became older.

The door closed and latched from the outside. There was no air circulation except for small holes drilled into the cabinet door. Originally, they had been drilled to keep the produce from rotting as quickly. Now, the holes were small windows into a kitchen filled with pain and horror.

Each time Aunt Rose walked past the bin, she would kick the door and scream at him to pray louder for forgiveness. This was the angriest she had ever been. It was quite evident to Itchy that she felt he had crossed over to a new level of depravity. When he was young, his prayers were heartfelt. He wanted to be clean, but after years of belittlement and reinforcement of his undeserving and vile nature, his prayers were hollow and solely to pacify this enraged woman. His knees and legs

began to ache and his muscles throbbed.

Aunt Rose's rantings over the years filled in the holes of Itchy's history. His mother, June, had become pregnant at the age of sixteen. She was the youngest and the wild child in her family of staunch believers. She had run off to California with Itchy's daddy, Arthur, who was seventeen. They didn't have the decency to get married and lived in lustful sin. His father was blonde, handsome, and charming, like all demons were, and he'd tempted June beyond her strength to resist.

When Itchy was only six years old, his mother escaped and left Itchy to survive his father's brutality alone. No one heard from June again and Itchy didn't know if she was alive or dead. Most days, he hoped she was dead, a long, painful, lonely death.

Itchy had earned his name by contracting a severe case of head lice when he was young. His father's abuse included extreme neglect. When he did go to school, the kids were relentless with their taunting. Itchy hated the nickname, but hated his real name even more. His real name, Arthur, was his father's name.

Eventually, his father was arrested for manslaughter, a bar fight gone bad, and the police officers took Itchy to Langston Hall. Most kids would be scared in a children's home, but Itchy felt safe there. He had three meals a day, a clean bed, and clean clothes. He didn't make many friends but there was one girl who touched him deeply. Her name was Pagne. He didn't know her for long, but she would always be in his heart, one of the three females he would ever trust.

The county eventually located his widowed Aunt Rose and she begrudgingly agreed to take Itchy to live with her. "It is the Christian thing to do," she told the social worker. He was flown back to Boston to live with her and her son, Darrell. Itchy was excited to have a new home and an older brother. Darrell, however, was indifferent. He was too busy avoiding his mother's wrath and quickly learned that having Itchy around proved to be an advantage. If he lay low, Itchy caught most of the hell.

Before arriving, Itchy had no idea of the loathing his aunt harbored or the horror that awaited him.



Chapter 1

Friday

When Charley Abrams pulled into the bank's parking lot, Charley was relieved to find it empty. There was no one at the ATM. When she walked up to the machine, she saw an electronic message on the screen announcing that the ATM was offline for programming updates and would be offline for several hours. Charley was annoyed. She hated going into the bank for simple transactions. There was always a wait, but she needed to deposit a large check today. When she approached the reflective doors, Charley stared at her reflection. She had become her mother over the years. There were wrinkles, but they weren't deeply etched like a lot of women her age. Her body build was always meaty, gradually heavier as she got older. She liked to say that she wasn't overweight, just too short. When asked how tall she wasn't, Charley would smile and say, "four-twelve."

Charley kept her hair in a spiky short style and had recently allowed it to remain gray. This was a big adjustment in her appearance. Though she had watched the face of an old woman slowly appear as the years passed, she still admired her eyes. They were large and gray. They weren't as bright as they used to be, but still unique. Charley had never liked her mouth. She had thin lips and always envied women with pouty, full mouths. She had entertained the idea of Botox injections when younger, but it required needles and that was a definite deal breaker. When she pulled open the mirror of herself, she was glad to see that she was the only customer in the bank.

When her transaction was complete, Charley tucked her receipt into her pocket. As she turned toward the door

RAIDER'S Vendetta

to leave, she heard a loud commotion and looked up. Charley saw two men with ball caps pulled down low, bandanas over their mouths and noses, pushing a young woman through the doors. One of the men shoved the woman and she fell to the floor, landing on her hands and knees. Charley grimaced with sympathy pain. She had fallen recently and remembered how it had jarred her whole body. The second man, who was quite tall and had a large build, turned the dead bolt, pointed a gun at the group of tellers, and bellowed, "Everyone behind the counter, take three steps back with your hands over your head! Now!" The shorter man grabbed the fallen woman's arm and drug her further into the bank, then snarled at her to lay down flat on the floor.

"You," the larger man said, glaring at Charley, "get down on the floor." Charley slid down the front of the counter and sat down. "Down flat, face on the floor," the man screamed at her. Charley quickly lay down, staring at the floor.

The shorter man, thin but muscular, moved behind the counter and raised his gun so everyone saw it. He also had a large, open black garbage bag. He swiftly moved from station to station, making each of the tellers step up and open their drawer. The money moved quickly from the drawers into the bag.

Once the drawers were emptied, the robber behind the counter herded all the tellers around to the front. Charley hoped that someone had triggered the silent alarm. She sensed the movement of bodies close to her as the tellers were told to lie flat on the floor. She was curious, but didn't look up. She wondered why the bank didn't have an armed security guard. Weren't all banks supposed to have a guard? If she survived this, she would find a new bank with big guards and big guns.

The shorter man made his way to the doors while pointing the gun at the group of people on the floor. "Let's get going!" he hollered at his companion.

No response.

"Man, we gotta go. Now!"

"We got time... wanna check the vault," the taller man threw back as he knelt by the teller closest to Charley.

"Who can open the vault?" he sputtered as he grabbed the young

woman by her hair. His other hand held the gun next to her skull and tapped it hard. Charley heard her yelp in pain.

“The manager, Mr. Mitchell.” Since there was only one man working in the bank, it was obvious who he was. Charley heard the masked man jump up and move to her right. She positioned her head slightly so she was able to see where the manager was lying. The robber grabbed him and pulled him up, holding the gun next to his chest. The tension was building as the shorter man continued to scream and curse at his partner who was dragging the manager back to the vault.

“Shut up! We’re almost done here,” the taller man yelled back.

Charley slowly shifted herself to get a better view of the room. The woman next to her looked like she was going to pass out. Charley smiled, hoping it would reassure her. Charley saw the man closest to the door. She had time to take in details now. Muscular, but not big, jeans, Nike tennis shoes, long sleeved blue shirt, red print bandana, and an Oakland Raiders cap. It was too hot to be wearing a long sleeved shirt. Charley assumed he had tattoos he was covering, but enough skin was showing to know that he was Caucasian. His hair was tucked under the hat, but a little blonde still showed. She decided to label that one Raider.

Once the vault was opened, the manager turned to face the bank robber. In that moment, the bandana slipped down off the robber’s face. The two men locked eyes and the realization that the robber could now be identified registered with both men. The robber’s eyes narrowed with an evil determination. Mr. Mitchell had only one option, to take the gun.

Charley jerked as she heard struggling and then the blast of the gun as it went off. She saw Raider move to the center of the bank and lift his gun. She squeezed her eyes shut, a natural reaction, as another shot rang through the bank. She heard the loud wail of a man and then the thud as he went down. “Darrell!” Raider bellowed. Charley heard another man cursing and moaning. “Damn it, Darrell, what did you do?”

Raider demanded that they all slide to the left wall and sit with their hands on their heads as he made his way to the counter. He kicked the young woman he’d pushed down earlier and screamed at her to move over with the others. She managed to make it to the wall without throwing up. Raider kept his gun pointed at the stricken group of women.

RAIDER'S Vendetta

He looked over the counter and saw the manager in a crumpled heap and Darrell sitting on the floor. His hand clutched his chest as the blood oozed between his fingers.

“Holy crap, Darrell. How bad is it?”

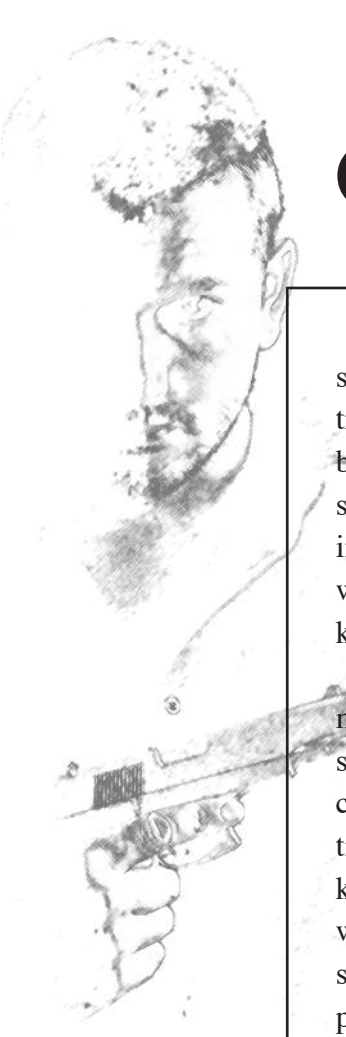
“Bad enough to kill me I expect,” Darrell managed to say with sarcasm. Darrell tried to stand but fell onto his back. “Get the hell outta here, I’m done.”

“You ass, I should leave you,” Raider snarled.

Raider moved around the end of the counter to get to Darrell, still trying to keep all the hostages in view. His partner lay on his back, unblinking eyes staring at the ceiling. He was obviously dead. Raider looked at the front doors, his expression frantic, like that of a trapped animal looking for a way to escape.

Charley, trying to make sense of what happened, assumed that Mr. Mitchell had grabbed the gun, killed the robber in the scuffle, and was shot by Raider before he got off another round. The coppery smell of blood filled the bank.

When Raider came around to the front of the counter, he saw several cars pulling in. They appeared to be customers. Charley could see that he had no idea what to do now. “In and out quick, you stupid idiot,” he mumbled under his breath.



Chapter 2

As Charley scanned the room with her limited view, she saw an elderly man walk up to the bank entrance and try to open the door. The bank doors were tinted almost black, since they faced west, and she knew the man only saw his reflection in the doors, even though the people inside saw him. He looked confused, then looked at his watch and tried the door once more. He stood there, not knowing what to do next, baffled by the locked door.

It appeared to Charley, that Raider would rush the old man and get past him before he could react; might even shoot him. As Raider moved toward the doors, four construction workers moved in behind the old man. They tried the door, also looking confused. One of them knocked and waited. The conversation among the group was accented with shrugs and searching looks, seeking a sign or someone with an explanation. Several of the men pressed their faces against the glass, trying to see into the bank. They all stood there, waiting, discussing the situation. More people joined the group. A woman pulled out a cell phone and dialed. Charley heard the phone ringing from behind the counter. Each ring made the room vibrate as if a gong had been hit. Everyone held their breath. The woman hung up and tried again. The ringing continued. Raider appeared to be calm, but Charley was close enough to see his hand twitching as he held the gun. She feared the outcome for all of them. Charley silently began praying to God. The woman with the phone hung up again and dialed a short number. Charley assumed it was 911.

Charley heard Raider quietly repeating, "Leave." The

RAIDER'S Vendetta

young woman on her cell phone became more animated, then suddenly became still, staring at the locked doors. She slowly began stepping back, instructing the others to do the same, keeping her eyes glued on the doors. Obviously, the police had warned them to move back for their safety. The construction workers hesitated but finally moved a short distance away. Charley identified the body language; the group of strong men were primed for a fight. They were ready to be heroes. She knew Raider would not be exiting through the front doors. The rest of the group moved to the far side of the parking lot and appeared to be waiting for the show to begin. Raider squatted on the floor, keeping the gun turned on the group, as he tried to use the bandana to wipe the sweat away from his eyes. This was difficult to do while keeping his face hidden. Charley thought how hot it must be in that disguise. By now, he would have been racing away in a fast car, air conditioner blasting, counting the money, if his partner had not gotten greedy.

They didn't have to wait long. A black and white cruiser pulled into the lot and several officers got out. They stayed on the far side of their cruiser. One officer took out a phone and dialed the bank's number.

The hostages were startled when they heard the phone begin to ring again. Raider jumped up and paced some more.

"Should we answer it?" one of the teller's asked. The bank robber seemed to be searching his brain for an idea.

"Yeah," he finally said. "Tell them the electricity is off and you had to close down for awhile." The teller, whose nametag said Anne, slowly got up and picked up the phone. Raider was pointing his gun at the young lady who had been pushed into the bank. He jerked the gun at her to remind Anne that he would shoot if she didn't do what he said.

"Hello, Ellisville Bank," she managed to say. Charley was impressed. She didn't know if she would be able to speak. "Everything is fine, Officer. Our power went out and it is procedure to lock the doors until everything is back up and running." Pause. "I assure you, we are all fine." Pause again. "I realize you have a job to do, but Mr. Mitchell is not here. Only he can authorize us to unlock the doors." Another pause. "I'm sorry, sir. Soon, sir," then she was quiet, listening to the other end of the line. From her facial expression, it was obvious to Charley that the officer was not buying her explanation.

Anne hesitated and looked at Raider. “They want to talk to you, sir. They know something is wrong.” Raider began pacing and cursing again.

“Hang up you moron” he said through clenched teeth. Anne hung up the phone. She stood there, scared to move or speak. Raider walked over to her and smacked her across the face with the gun. She fell to the floor, whimpering. He pointed the gun at her and pulled back the hammer.

She managed to whisper between her sobs, “He knew. I didn’t tell him, he already knew. You heard me. I tried to send them away.” Charley felt her heart in her throat. She thought about trying to knock him off his feet with her legs, but he was too far away.

Dear God, please don’t let him kill her! she screamed in her head. She heard the hammer slip back into position.

“All of you get behind the counter.” They half crawled, half slid to the new location. Charley was able to get next to Anne and put her arm around her shoulder. She looked at the damage to her face and saw that, in spite of all the blood, the injuries were not serious. She would be bruised and swollen, but she would be okay. She felt Anne move in tighter next to her. Charley felt her whole body quivering.

They jumped when the phone began ringing again. No one moved to answer it. Raider squatted across from them, aiming the gun from one frantic face to another. The ringing kept going and going. It felt warmer inside the bank. Was it the closeness of the group, the sweat that comes with fear, or had they shut off the air conditioning? Charley had seen that happen in cop shows; make the criminals as uncomfortable as possible. She always felt bad for the hostages and now she would be the one sweating it out. The phone finally stopped ringing.

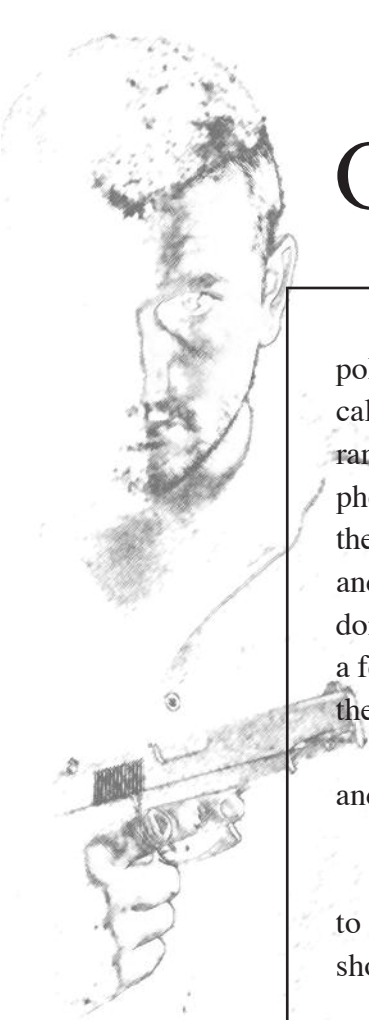
~

Now that they were behind the counter, they couldn’t see anything outside, but Raider would stand periodically to check on things. More police cars had pulled in. Raider wasn’t sure what to do now. He had to think quickly. They had always done hit and run robberies; gas stations,

RAIDER'S Vendetta

convenience stores, or drunks trying to find their cars. This was their first bank robbery and Darrell had said he had it all worked out. "Don't worry, it'll be a breeze. The drawers will have plenty. It's payday for most slobs and they load the drawers up just before lunch. We'll hit them hard and fast."

Darrell, you fool, you didn't say anything about the vault, he thought. Even Raider knew the vault required too much time, especially with just two guys.



Chapter 3

A voice boomed through a bullhorn, "This is the police. We want to talk to whoever is in charge. We'll be calling you." After what felt like an eternity, the phone rang. Raider picked it up on the tenth ring. He held the phone to his ear, but didn't speak. Agent Morris was on the other end. "I'm Agent Megan Morris, with the FBI, and I want to help you help us resolve this situation. We don't want anyone hurt. What can we do for you?" After a few minutes of hesitation, he moved the receiver under the bandana.

"Look, I don't want anyone else killed. Just clear out and I'll leave."

"Anyone else? People have been killed? Wounded?"

"I'm not telling you anything. I just need you all to leave and no one will get hurt. If you don't, I will shoot someone."

"Can you tell me who is in there with you?" Raider slammed the phone down, hoping he burst the wanna-be cop's eardrum. Women with badges, just as bad as soldiers with boobs. Raider got up and looked around the bank. He needed to find a way to control the hostages while he searched the bank for a way out. He glanced over to the vault and saw that the metal bar door was standing open; the keys were still in the lock. "All of you, move into the vault, stay low."

They crawled past Mr. Mitchell's body and tried not to look into his shocked face, frozen in death. Then they crawled past the second body. It had been many years since this fifty-seven year old woman had been on her knees, let alone traveled on them. Blood had drained onto the floor from both bodies and their hands and knees were

RAIDER'S Vendetta

covered with the warm stickiness.

Charley made it into the vault first. The rest of the hostages followed her in and huddled in the far corner. Raider pulled the phone in the vault out of the wall and stepped out to shut the gate. Raider tested it with a hard tug. Once the hostages were locked in and no longer a threat, he knelt down and looked into Darrell's glazed over eyes. *What the hell did you get me into Darrell?* he thought. He saw the gun lying between his cousin's thighs. Raider picked it up and wiped the blood onto his jeans. He pocketed the keys, stuck the second gun in his waistband, and moved back into the bank to locate the cameras.

Raider entered each office and room looking for other employees or an exit. If a door was locked, he forced it open. He found the room with the recording boxes and surveillance equipment. He saw there were two screens. One was positioned to cover the front doors and the second would show the faces of people in line at the teller windows. He went back into the bank and smashed both cameras. He jumped when the phone rang. Raider decided to pick it up and see what they were offering.

"Thank you for picking up. I'd like to help," Agent Morris offered. Raider thought for a minute,

"Okay" he said with a smirk.

"How would you like for me to address you?" she asked.

"Sir will be just fine."

"I'm here to work with you. Tell me what you need."

"I want a helicopter and a pilot. If you provide that, I won't kill anyone. So you do what you gotta do to work that out." Raider slammed the phone down. He pulled the scarf off his face and the air, even though warm, felt good on his skin.

He continued to search for another way out. He knew he wasn't going out those front doors. He knew they would string him along, promise him anything, and wait for a sniper to get a clear shot. Raider figured he would find a way to slip out and be long gone before anyone knew he wasn't there. He checked the ducts, the windows, and the service doors. He saw that cruisers had surrounded the bank. He kicked himself for being disappointed. What did he think they would do? He checked for trap doors that would lead to the roof or under the building.

Charley knelt next to Anne to offer whatever comfort she could. She felt the bulk of her cell phone in her pocket. She looked out the vault gate bars, and didn't see or hear anything. She prayed that Raider wasn't on his way back. Charley looked at the huddled mass of women. "Is there anyone else in the bank, in any of the offices?"

"No," Geena answered. "We all come behind the counter for the lunch crowd."

Charley only had two bars on her phone and hoped it was enough to send a text. She texted her daughter, Mari, and told her where she was. When her daughter's return text flashed on the screen, Charley felt connected to the outside world again. She then entered the other hostages' names and phone numbers. There were a total of seven women: Charley; Angie, the lady they had pushed in the door; Anne, the teller hit with the gun; Lenore, the supervisor; Geena, the loan officer; Brittany, a teller; and Iris, another teller. Next, she texted that one of the robbers and the bank manager had been killed. She also told her to tell the police there was only one robber in the bank and all the hostages were locked in the vault. After assuring her daughter she was fine, she turned the volume off and hid the phone in the vault so she wouldn't be found with it. After getting the message from Mari, Angie's husband texted her to tell her that he loved her and he would be at the bank soon. Angie texted him back and told him they were all safe in the vault.

Charley saw the fear in the women's eyes. "I'd like to pray for our safety," Charley suggested.

Angie quickly straightened up and said, "Absolutely, we pray all the time; me, my husband and my three little ones.

The other women looked at Charley in disbelief. Lenore even snickered at the suggestion. "If God is so wonderful, why are we sitting in here? Why is Mr. Mitchell dead? He was a Christian. Just pray silently if you're going to pray. I don't want to hear it. The police will get us out of here."

Charley was surprised that the severity of their situation didn't lead them to want God's protection. Charley prayed silently while holding

RAIDER'S Vendetta

Angie's hand. She felt Angie squeeze her hand several times. She felt blessed to know that they were united in their prayer. The Holy Spirit touched Charlie's soul with the understanding that she was needed in this crisis.

A sketch of a man's face and hand holding a handgun. The man has a beard and is looking down. The hand is holding a handgun, with the barrel pointing towards the left.

Chapter 4

Raider couldn't find a way out that wouldn't put him face to face with the police. He had been frantically searching for the last hour, no exit. He had found a pile of white tablecloths used for the bank's display tables and several boxes of promotional t-shirts. These could come in handy.

Raider pulled the bandana back up. He got to the vault door and then he heard the distinct vibration of a cell phone. No one is without a cell phone these days. He began cursing the women, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. "I want your phones, all of them." He pointed the gun at Lenore, "I'll blow her head off." Angie slid her phone over to his feet. The other ladies had been working, so no phones were on their person. He looked at Charley and she stared back. "I don't have a phone on me," she finally said. She wasn't lying; it certainly wasn't on her. He told her to stand up. He patted her down and when he was convinced she wasn't concealing a phone, he pushed her back to the floor.

It was a deranged sight, this man with a gun, looming over them, covered in blood. Charley knew this vision would terrorize any sane person. Raider picked up Angie's phone and checked her outgoing calls and then texts. Angie cringed with fear, realizing she should have deleted the message to her husband when she had the chance. He saw her last text sent and didn't bother to read any further. Raider glared at her through narrowed eyes. Without hesitation, he lifted the gun and shot her. He didn't shoot to kill, but hit her in the thigh. "You stupid, stupid woman," he muttered as she wailed in pain. Charley moved toward her and he lifted the gun to her

RAIDER'S Vendetta

face. Her nose was inches from the end of the barrel. She smelled the hot metal and the spent bullet. "Stay put or you're next," he growled. Charley wasn't a nurse, but she knew, if left unattended, Angie would bleed out.

"She's worth more to you alive," Charley stated calmly, even though she was terrified on the inside. "You may have hit a major artery. Just let me get a tourniquet on it so she doesn't die." Raider looked at the blood gushing from Angie's leg. He didn't respond but lowered the gun and stepped back. Charley pulled off Angie's t-shirt and wrapped it tightly around Angie's thigh above the bullet hole. She saw the mixture of terror, shock, and anguish in Angie's eyes. "God is with us," she mouthed to Angie. Angie seemed to relax a little.

The bank phone began to ring. Raider pointed the gun at Geena, "You answer it and tell them time is ticking. They now have a wounded hostage." Geena stood up slowly and Raider shoved her to the nearest phone, just outside the vault. She answered the phone and relayed his message word for word. They wanted to know details and Geena looked at Raider. "Hang up!" he screamed. He pushed Geena toward the storage closet and demanded, "Grab those T-shirts and take them into the vault." Geena obeyed. The women were instructed to rip the shirts into strips. Charley took one of them and helped Angie put it on. She knew Angie wouldn't want to be sitting there in just her bra. Raider started to stop her but found it curious that this old woman would worry about modesty. Charley also took several of the shirts and folded them into a compress for Angie's wound.

Raider then had all the women tie themselves together, just a few inches apart, with their arms extended. He looked at Angie and realized she wasn't mobile. To move her, they would have to drag her. She would have to be left in the vault. He had the remaining women at each end of the shredded T-shirt rope tie themselves together to make a circle. He looked at his shield and was pleased. Raider ducked under the rope and into the center of the circle. Now he would have their bodies as a shield. Any attempts to subdue him would jeopardize the women.

Raider kept his gun pointed in Geena's side. "Anyone try anything and I won't miss. At this range, the bullet will tear her in half." Charley

was directly in front of Raider, face to face. She hadn't known what he was planning or she would have turned around before tying herself in. She walked backward as they moved into the bank. She could see the details of his eyes, deep green with gold veining. How did such beautiful eyes contain such hate? She found herself praying that she wouldn't trip. If she went down, the whole group would go down. The gun could easily go off and kill one of them.

Trying to walk past the bodies and maneuver across the blood-covered floor was difficult. The women could smell the mixture of their sweat as they shuffled together. It was soured and musty. Raider's was the strongest. His anxiety level combined with the heat in the bank made it ooze from his pores. The bank was warm and uncomfortable, but at least they were no longer sitting in the vault. It felt too much like a tomb. They were tied so close together, there was no airflow to help dissipate their body heat. Charley felt like she was suffocating.

The phone rang again. They shuffled their way to the desk and Raider picked up the receiver and waited.

"Sir," Agent Morris said. "We are working on getting your chopper. We can land it in the field just behind the bank, but we need to know that the ladies are safe and that you have not hurt them. We heard a shot."

"Well, one got shot for blabbing her mouth. She's alive but not for long."

"Sir, please allow her to leave the bank. You don't want a murder against you, especially of an innocent woman. Juries won't show mercy to a man who shoots an unarmed woman." Raider considered what she was saying.

"You're assuming that I will get caught and face a jury," Raider replied.

"It would show good faith with us if you let her go so she can get medical attention. We will see that you are a man of character."

Raider knew the routine. They were stalling, looking for an opportunity to take him out. He wasn't ready to make a move yet. He had worked out a plan now and needed to drag things out. "What about a trade?" he suggested. "The woman for some food and cold drinks."

"We can do that Sir. Give us twenty minutes. We will put the food

RAIDER'S Vendetta

at the front door. Just let her slip out and we can work out the rest of your demands once we have a show of good faith. How many people are there with you? We want to make sure we get enough food.”

“You mean alive? Of course you do.” Raider looked around him and there were six women in his circle of protection. “Seven including the wounded snitch,” he supplied.

“Okay Sir, have the wounded lady come to the door. We will have the food shortly.” Agent Morris quickly hung up and Raider suspected she had intentionally cut him off before he could protest. The group moved back to the vault and Raider unlocked the gate. Angie was unconscious and wouldn’t wake up when Raider slapped her. He tried several times, using more force with each strike. In frustration, anger, and total disregard for her, he punched her hard in the face. She didn’t stir. Charley saw how pale Angie was. The wound wasn’t gushing, but the makeshift bandage was soaked through with her precious blood.

“Sir, we need to get her out now, she doesn’t have long.” Raider turned and Charley saw him searching their faces to see who had spoken. Charley took a deep breath, “Sir, please, let’s get her to the door.” Raider kept his gun in one hand and grabbed Angie’s good leg with the other. He pulled until she slid down the wall and lay flat on her back. With the help of several of the women, they drug Angie into the main foyer of the bank, ten feet from the door. Raider knew that if they all struggled to get her out the door, the cops would pick him off even while surrounded by his shield. He instructed everyone to pull back into the center of the bank. He looked at Lenore who appeared to be the strongest of the women.

“Untie yourself. You will drag her through the door and bring in the food.” He nodded toward Angie, still unconscious on the floor. “Remember, I have the gun shoved into your buddy’s back,” he had grabbed Iris. “You try to run and she’s dead. Her blood is on your hands.” Lenore looked into Iris’s pleading eyes. Lenore nodded agreement and slowly untied herself from the shield of women. She moved over to Angie and saw the officers setting bags of food just outside the door. She slipped her arms under Angie’s and backed over to the door, struggling to drag Angie by herself. She set Angie down and turned to unlock and open the door. Lenore pushed it open a few inches and blocked it from

closing with her foot. She then reached down to pick up Angie. When her trembling hands were only an inch from Angie's dying body she lurched to her right and pushed through the doors, leaving Angie on the floor and Iris's fate up to Raider. By the time her escape registered with Raider, she was gone.

"Dammit!" he screamed. Iris body tightened. Suddenly, an officer dressed in full SWAT gear pulled open the door, grabbed Angie by the shoulders, and drug her out of the bank. Raider pulled the women tight around him, blocking any access.

~

The officer pulled Angie around the corner of the bank and to a waiting ambulance. She was rushed to the hospital with her husband sobbing at her side. Agent Morris asked what he could see.

"Well, there are five more women. Everyone is covered with blood, but they all look okay. Must have been a massacre in there. I only saw one suspect, but he had the women tied together as a human shield around him. Very clever," the officer observed.

"Yes, yes, it is. I think he's in over his head, but he's quick on his feet. That's not good." Agent Morris replied.

~

Raider picked up the ringing phone. "Sir," Agent Morris said, "Don't think things went the way you planned. Food is still out here and you're down two hostages." Raider was still reeling from Lenore's cowardly betrayal. He wasn't sure what to do about Iris. He should shoot her, but that hadn't worked out so well with the blonde in the vault. Did he want to kill her? No, he needed her; he needed all of the hostages.

"No, not at all how I planned. Didn't think she was a heartless bitch, but guess you all are down deep."

"Well, we're going to give you this one, tell the press you released two hostages. Looks good for you, Sir. Want to make sure those ladies get some food, been a rough day for them. I'll have the officer bring the

RAIDER'S Vendetta

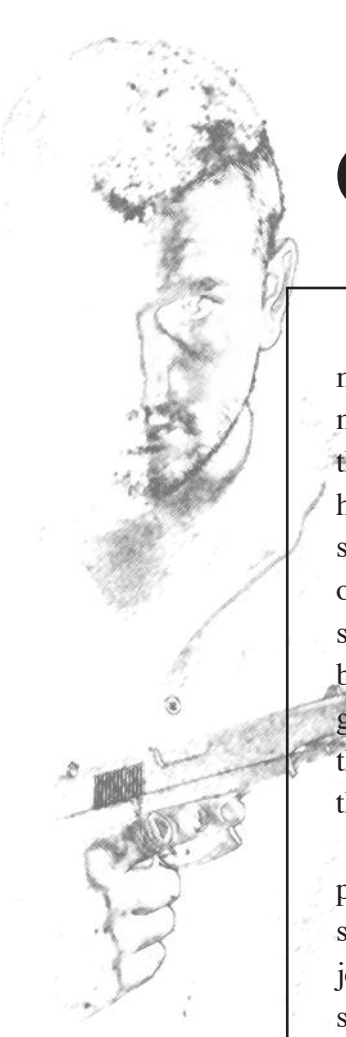
food inside the door.”

“No, *Megan*, no one is starving in here. Keep your food.”

Raider slammed down the phone and moved his party back behind the counter. He had to regroup. The door was unlocked and he was a sitting duck. Raider found himself looking into the face of Charley. He thought he saw something in her eyes. Gratitude? “What’s up with you?” he asked.

“Thank you for not shooting Iris,” she said softly.

“If you care about these women, you’ll go lock that door. If you take off, I will shoot her this time.” He put the gun up to Iris’s temple. There were several moments of intense eye contact between Raider and Charley. She untied her bindings and walked with determination to the door. She looked back at Iris and smiled a reassuring smile. Charley obviously decided to collect the food. She knelt down then opened the door a few inches. Raider saw an officer crouched on the far side of the food, reaching to grab Charley’s arm to pull her out, but he pulled back. Charley pulled the food in, locked the door, moved back to the group, and retied her bindings. This woman intrigued Raider. *Why didn’t she run? She could have escaped. Why didn’t the officer try to grab her?*



Chapter 5

Their appetites surprised the ladies. The events of the morning had drained them and their bodies begged for nourishment. Raider refrained from eating, even though the burritos smelled incredible. He didn't trust that they hadn't laced the food with something. He would wait to see if the ladies reacted and then eat later if they were okay. He took one of the sealed water bottles and searched for pinpricks before downing it. The cold water brought his body temperature down several degrees. The group sat on the floor, legs crossed, with Raider still in the center. He kept the bandana over his face, even with the sweltering heat.

Iris ate her burrito slowly, like a timid little bird picking at the edges. Raider watched her, wondering how someone so frail survived life. She caught his gaze and jerked when he said, "Boo." Her distress was obvious and she was ready to crumble.

Raider noticed that Charley didn't eat, and was suspicious and confused by Charley. He stared at her and when she looked up, they made eye contact. He nodded toward the burritos and she said, "No thanks, beans do not like me."

After everyone else had finished eating, they sat and waited. The phone rang. Geena was closest and answered when Raider nodded his head. She handed him the receiver. "Sir, Agent Morris here," Megan said.

"Yes, hello *Megan*," Raider responded with mock familiarity.

"Everyone get enough to eat?" she asked, feigning sincerity.

RAIDER'S Vendetta

“Yes, yes we did,” he said with sarcasm.

“Well, we are working on that chopper, and it should be here any time. Since this is wrapping up soon, think you can spare a hostage? Maybe someone older, someone with health issues?” Raider looked at the ladies. Charley was the only one he would consider as older. “Would go a long way with my bosses if I can show them you are willing to work with me.”

“What do I get out of this? Why should I work with you? Going to get my chopper either way.” Raider enjoyed toying with her, this woman with a badge – thinking she was more than any other tramp out there.

“What do you want, Sir?” She waited without breathing.

“You turn the air back on and I’ll send someone out.” It was dreadfully hot in the bank and Raider was having trouble thinking. He knew the cool air would revive him.

“We have to see a hostage released first; that’s how it works.”

“No, Megan, that’s not how it works, air first. You can always shut it off if I don’t deliver. I can’t do a thing if you lie on your end. Oh, that’s right, I can shoot someone. The advantage of having multiple hostages. Cushion.”

Agent Morris hesitated and then responded, “Okay, Sir, we’ll do it your way. Air, then you release a hostage.”

“Great, I’ll be waiting. Don’t take too long though, you understand?”

“Yes, Sir, I do.” Within ten minutes, they felt the cool air flowing into the bank. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, but only for a moment. Raider wasn’t ready to give up a hostage quite yet. He wanted the bank to cool down first, in case they shut off the air again once the hostage was released. He knew that this was a game of wits and deception. He couldn’t count on anything they said. He had to rely on his military training and skills. He also knew he had to stall until sunset if his only option was going to work.

Iris spoke so quietly they almost didn’t hear her. “How long will you keep us here?” she asked. Raider looked in the direction of the doors.

“I don’t know,” he lied.

Iris spoke again, an embarrassed tone in her voice. “I *really* need to use the restroom now.” Raider had wondered when this would present

itself. Raider wasn't surprised that Iris needed to relieve herself, but he had no idea how urgent the need was. They all stood and moved as a group to the restroom. During his earlier search of the bank, Raider had found a small bathroom that didn't have a window. They would not be able to escape. When they reached the bathroom, Iris untied herself and rushed in.

"If anyone else needs to go, do it now. I'm not going to be taking potty breaks all afternoon," snapped Raider. Panic began to creep up in Raider's mind. He realized that he also needed to use the restroom, and not just to pee. He tried to push down the urge, but this was not going to pass.

After the rest of the ladies had used the toilet, his own need had become urgent. He had not thought this part out. The ladies would be tied up tight, but he was concerned that the cops might have eyes inside the bank. A small wire with a camera could be pushed through small openings or vents. He could not be in the bathroom alone for any amount of time. The cops would rush in while he had his pants down. This presented an awkward situation, but he had no choice. He looked at the women and decided to have Charley and Iris tie up the other ladies. Charley was older and Iris was frail. He knew they weren't a threat if they decided to attack, he would easily kill them. He told them to tie the other hostages tight and threatened to kill them if anyone worked loose. Charley and Iris did their best not to hurt the ladies, but did not want to test him either. Once the ladies were tied up, he motioned for Charley and Iris to move into the bathroom with him. Iris's eyes showed panic. She was a young, attractive woman and Raider knew she thought he was going to violate them. Raider would have laughed if he had not felt such humiliation since his aunt was alive.

~

Once Raider positioned himself by the toilet and unzipped his pants, Charley knew that this was going to be awkward. The embarrassment was minimized when they were told to face the wall, shut their eyes, and not say a word. Charley considered making a run for it while he was

RAIDER'S Vendetta

indisposed, but she didn't know where the gun was pointed. It would be aimed at one of them and she knew she couldn't outrun a bullet. Once Raider was finished, they joined the others, and sat on the floor. No one had escaped.

Charley was distracted, staring at the clock, playing out all the ways this could end. She began praying silently and was surprised to get a word from the Holy Spirit. It was "Stay." No sooner than she heard this direction, Raider told her to untie herself from the other ladies.

"You'll be leaving us, Granny," Raider shared. Charley was relieved and quickly began to untie herself.

Again she heard the voice of the Holy Spirit say, "Stay." Charley sat back on her heels and tried to make sense of this direction. She wanted to argue, to plead for her release, but the Holy Spirit spoke again, firmly, and she knew the plan and purpose.

"Get moving you stupid woman, I'm telling you that you get to leave." Just as he finished speaking, Iris covered her mouth but could not stop the flow of vomit. "Are you kidding me?" Raider yelled as he moved back to avoid the gush of stinking bile mixed with burrito, releasing a flood of obscenities as he glared at her. Iris drew back as far as possible, terrified, waiting to see what he was going to do. Would he shoot her? Several ladies began to weep, which agitated him even more.

Charley had to do something before someone got shot, even if she brought his wrath on her. She lightly touched his shoulder and whispered, "Raider, please let Iris leave instead. Obviously, she is very ill." Charley suspected that Iris's frail demeanor was unable to withstand the terror of being held hostage.

"Why are you calling me Raider?"

"It's just a name. I don't know your real one." He looked confused. Charley pointed at his head, "Your hat, the Raiders?" Raider began laughing hysterically, not because of the name, but the insanity of his circumstance. "What's your name?"

Charley hesitated, she didn't want to stand out from the rest, but he was waiting. "Charley," she said quietly. He didn't react, she wasn't even sure he heard her. It didn't seem to matter any longer.

Raider stayed in the center of the women. When Iris wasn't in the bathroom, she was balled up on the floor, crying from the cramps that twisted her gut. "Please Raider, please let her go. She isn't getting any better," Charley pleaded. Raider looked at the quivering Iris and gagged at the smell of the vomit covering her clothes. Getting rid of that smell wasn't a terrible idea. "We don't want the air turned off, sir." Raider looked at Charley again, seeing the concern in her eyes.

"Can I get her to the door? She can't get there herself and I promise I won't run."

Raider knew she wouldn't. She could've escaped earlier and didn't. "Okay, but if you do run, I will shoot." He looked around at the remaining women, "What's your name?" Raider asked, looking at Geena.

"Geena," she said meekly.

"Okay Geena, you better hope Charley here is on the up and up." This threat was to scare the hostages, but he already knew Charley would be back. He was drained and losing his edge. He wanted them to know he was tough and mean, so he pulled the gun up to Geena's head and tapped several times. Not enough to hurt her but menacing none the less. Charley rolled her eyes and then caught herself. She didn't want to upset him. Raider caught her reaction but decided to pretend he hadn't. He was getting low on hostages and didn't want to shoot one unnecessarily. He had to stretch them out until the time was right.

~

Charley helped Iris to her feet and they slowly walked away from the others. When Charley got Iris to the doors, she set her down. "Now, when I open the doors, you crawl out. They will come grab you."

Iris looked up at Charley. "Why are you doing this? You could have left."

"You have a family at home?"

"Yes," said Iris.

"This is God's gift to them and you. He loves you Iris. Please take this opportunity to find Him."

RAIDER'S Vendetta

Iris looked at her, confused, and then smiled. Charley saw several officers moving near the door. Once she opened the door and they saw two hostages, they would make a grab for both of them. She knew if she didn't step back, they would drag her out, too. She couldn't let that happen. "Okay Iris, after I unlock the door, you gotta push it open with your shoulder and just crawl." Iris positioned herself. Charley turned the lock and as she stepped back the two officers pulled open the doors, startling Charley. One officer grabbed Iris's arms and yanked her through the doors like a ragdoll. The second officer grabbed Charley's arm. She felt the tug and dropped to the floor. She heard Geena scream "No." Charley braced her feet on the doorjamb and prevented herself from being pulled out the door. The officer had to let go and pull back quickly, before Raider had time to react and shoot. As soon as the officer let go, Charley rolled back into the bank.

Charley lay there, breathing deep panting breaths. She knew they wouldn't expect her back at the door. She jumped up, ran over, and locked it, then ran back to the others. Raider looked at her in total disbelief. She winked at Geena and began tying herself back into the circle.

~

Raider hated women. They lied, connived, cheated, humiliated, and sucked the life out of men. Charley didn't make sense in his world.

The phone rang. Raider looked forward to this call. They moved as a group to the closest phone and Raider picked it up. "Yes, Megan?"

"Thanks for sending out Iris. You got your mom in there with you?" Agent Morris asked. Raider grinned at Charley. "Nope, just a loyal hostage. Guess she didn't want Geena's brains splattered on the walls."

"Do the ladies need anything?"

"They'll be just fine when I'm on that chopper and they can go home to their families. When is that gonna be *Megan*? Do I need to shoot another one to show you I'm getting irritated? I won't kill her, just a good wound, and one that bleeds fast. Do you work well under pressure, Megan? Would that help move things along? I got plenty of bullets left,

got my partner's gun. I can spare another one if it will help motivate you."

"I'm on it Sir. You should hear it coming in soon." Raider heard Agent Morris slam her fist as she hung up. This triggered a satisfying grin.

~

Charley felt real hatred for this man. He was cruel and would do everything he threatened. She tried to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, but this is one time that she needed to remember that a snake is a snake and it doesn't think twice about biting.



Chapter 6

They could hear the constant hum of the air conditioner and Charley was thankful that they hadn't turned it off again. Brittany and Geena drifted in and out of a light doze. She looked over at Raider, who stared at the glass doors. Who was he and why was he so indifferent to life? He showed no remorse for killing the manager and he'd shot Angie without hesitation or emotion. How does a baby grow into such a monster?

Raider instructed them to return to the vault, bringing the tablecloths with them, and he moved out of the center. He took one of the t-shirts and tore eyeholes, then tied off the top of the shirt and, with his back turned, took off his bandana and hat. Next, he pulled the shirt over his head, pushing the sleeves into the shirt. He looked like a scarecrow when he turned around. He began to work on the tablecloths using a stapler.

It seemed like hours before the phone rang again and when Charley checked the clock, it had been. Why was Raider being so patient? She would have expected him to push for a quick escape. He seemed eerily calm, like a man with a plan.

Before entering the vault again, they had drug a phone close to the door. Raider picked up the phone and opened with, "I don't hear any blades whirling. Where is my chopper?"

"I'm sorry, Sir, my boss is stalling on me. He just doesn't think that you will keep your end of the bargain and let all of the hostages go. He wants to see another one come through those doors before he'll release the chopper."

"Well, Megan, I never said I'd let all the hostages go.

RAIDER'S Vendetta

Now that would be foolish of me, wouldn't it? But, I'll tell you what. If your boss wants to see my intentions, have him listen to this." Raider set the receiver down and ignored Agent Morris's pleas and lies. Raider looked at Geena and spoke without any emotion in his voice, calm, like a stranger on the street giving you directions. "I'm going to have to shoot you. I'll be careful and aim for your thigh. I hope I don't hit an artery. Don't think they can move fast enough to save you if that happens." Geena jerked out of her exhausted stupor and began screaming. Raider had the look of someone determined and detached. Charley knew he would do this.

"Wait," yelled Charley. "Shoot me." Raider turned his head toward her.

"You're crazy! Are you out of the loony bin on a two-day pass?"

"No, just listen to me, please. I'm old, kids are grown, husband is dead. I've only got an old cat at home." Charley looked at Geena. "Geena, you got kids?"

"Yes, two little girls," she managed to whisper.

"How old are you, hon?" Charley kept switching her eyes from Geena to Raider, watching his finger on the trigger.

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Raider, she could be crippled for life or dead. I've lived a good, long life. Shoot me."

"You're screwing with me. Don't think I won't do it."

"I know you will. I know you have to. This is survival for you. I get that. But, does it matter who? Can just as easily be me, right? Let me do this for Geena and her kids." Raider's confusion was obvious, and then Charley heard the gun go off as she felt a fist punch her in the face. She screamed from the pain in her jaw and nose. Raider hung up the phone.

Charley saw stars. Her head had snapped back with the punch. Blood gushed from her nose. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she tenderly examined her jaw and nose with her fingers. Her nose felt like it was broken.

Once she could think clearly, she looked at Geena, relieved that she was not shot. Charley then looked at Raider. She saw a flicker of regret in his eyes when he saw the blood pouring from her nose, but it dissolved

as soon as their eyes met. He glared at her and his words were an ominous whisper. "Next time, I will shoot you. Maybe I should anyway, put you out of your stinkin' misery. You are freakin' crazy." Geena was a mass of jelly, crying and shaking. Raider couldn't take it. "Shut up!" he screamed. Geena brought her hand to her mouth to smother her cries. The remaining ladies all sat there in silence, not wanting to draw Raider's attention.

~

It wasn't long before they heard the distinctive wop of a helicopter. Sunset was quickly approaching. The phone rang and it was Agent Morris. "Well, Sir, you hear that?"

"Yep, music to my ears."

"How's Charley. It was Charley you shot?"

"I don't know their names, not like we're ever going to hang out again."

"Well, is she okay?"

"Bleeding bad. Think she'll be okay if you guys follow directions."

"Let her come out, Sir. We need to get her to the hospital, right now."

"We put a tourniquet on her leg. I'll leave her in here. When we leave, you can come in and get her. Gotta apply pressure, Megan, you appear to work best under pressure."

"Okay, Sir. We'll do it your way. You need to come through the front and around to the right of the building." Raider hung up.

In a low whisper, "Geena, take these," Raider threw her several of the t-shirts, "soak them with blood from the bodies. If the blood on the floor has dried, you'll have to push on one of the bodies. It has to look like Charley is bleeding. Stay low, below the counter. I'm sure they have cameras hooked in and probably microphones." Geena obeyed. She had to push on the dead robber's body to force more blood onto the floor.

Raider looked at Charley. "If you tip off the cops when they come in, you'll get these women killed. You understand me?" he said just barely loud enough for Charley to hear. He then spoke in a much louder voice, hoping the police would hear, "The rest of you are coming with

RAIDER'S Vendetta

me. We'll move out to the chopper. I'm only taking one of you with me. The rest of you can run when I say. Got it?" They all nodded. Raider knew that dangling the carrot of freedom would buy compliance from the hostages and possibly the police if they were listening. They may refrain from any heroics if they thought most of the hostages would be released soon.

~

Charley felt a moment of relief that she would be rescued, but then the will of the Holy Spirit replayed in her head. She had to go to the helicopter. Charley wasn't clear what would come next, the Holy Spirit hadn't given her anymore, just that she was supposed to go to the helicopter with Raider. Charley looked into Geena's frantic face. She was clearly thinking *What if he takes me on the chopper?*

"Raider?" Charley said in a whisper.

"What now old lady?"

"Look, they won't know who's in here since you didn't give them a name. They'll just whisk whoever it is into the ambulance. Let Geena stay. Let her go home to her babies," she said quietly.

Raider looked at Charley in disbelief. "Who do you think you are? You runnin' some scam? You an old lady ninja who's going to take me down? You're up to something!" Raider whispered through clenched teeth.

Charley had to press, there wasn't much time. "Look Raider, you owe me one. I have done everything you said and I have done everything I promised. If you do this, I won't run. I will be the perfect hostage."

Raider looked in her eyes. She didn't blink or look away. He looked at Geena, and it was clear that she was barely functioning. "Okay, not because you asked, but because she is useless. Sit down." Raider instructed Geena. Charley wrapped Geena's leg in the bloody t-shirts and tied a strip around her thigh to look like a tourniquet.

"Not too tight is it?" she whispered to Geena.

"No, it's fine." Geena looked into Charley's determined face as she adjusted the deception to look real. "Just hold it and cry when they get

to you. Don't talk to the police. You're in too much pain, okay? You can answer all their questions once we're off the ground. You don't want them to figure out you're not hurt before we get to the chopper. If they don't think he's a lunatic, they might kill us by trying to take him. Once Raider and I are up, the rest will be safe, too." Geena looked at Charley, bewildered.

"You and Raider?" she barely spoke.

"Yes, hon, me and Raider. I'm not letting him take one of these girls if I can stop it."

"But what about you? Don't you want this over? Why take my place?" Charley looked into her sweet face.

"This is a gift from God. Seek Him out once this is over. He wants to help you have an incredible life with your family. I'll be fine. He's looking out for me. Please tell Brittany and Anne that God loves them and He protected them today."

Geena was sitting in front of the spot where Charley had hidden her phone, so she quickly slipped it out of hiding and into her pocket. Luckily, she had turned it off before she hid it. Last thing Charley needed was to receive a call.

"Get over here," Raider barked. "We gotta go." Charley patted the top of Geena's head and joined the group. Charley tied herself into the shield circle and moved as Raider led. He tried dragging the garbage bag full of money from the registers, then stood for a moment, considering the logistics of holding two guns, maneuvering in a tight group, and bringing the money, before moving on again. On the way out of the vault, he grabbed the stapled tablecloths. Raider maneuvered them behind the counter, where he found a zippered cash bag, then had Anne fill the bag up with as much of the stolen money as she could hold before stuffing it into his shirt.

"I'm going to give you guys your directions. Don't screw with me and you'll be home tonight in your little beds. If you mess up, you'll be in the morgue. I will have a gun on two of you at all times," Raider threatened.

Agent Morris stood outside the bank, watching for any movement

RAIDER'S Vendetta

at the door. She had her best gunmen in position. They planned to shoot him in the head even though the hostages surrounded him. He would drop instantly. She would do everything possible to keep him from getting to the chopper.

The bank door slowly opened and, to Agent Morris's dismay, a huge white ghost slowly moved out. A large mass of white cloth covered the group. Using the stapler, Raider had converted the tablecloths into a large tent, cutting small slits in the sheet so they could see. The police couldn't even see their legs. Without a clear shot, the cops could not shoot.

Agent Morris considered rushing them, their visibility had to be horrible, but she wasn't dealing with a dummy. He had to have considered that possibility and his guns would be pointed at someone. Any attempt to take him down would result in the injury or death of one or more of the hostages. They could not be sure of getting to him before he pulled the trigger and, grouped so tightly together, he wouldn't miss his shot. Agent Morris signaled for everyone to back off and for the snipers to stand down.

"Anne, yell out and tell them to cut the engine," Raider instructed. Anne did as she was told.

Agent Morris bit her lip in frustration. She hadn't known he would come out covered, but had quickly realized the swirling air from the blades was to their advantage. They would get a break when the blades blew the sheet up, revealing the prize underneath. The white ghost stopped, waiting for her to comply. Agent Morris yelled, "Sir, you can't stand there all day. Give yourself up."

One of the ladies yelled out, "If you don't turn off that engine, he will shoot as many of us in the head as he can before you take him down. He is a dead man and he doesn't mind taking us with him. He has nothing to lose and he thinks you do."

There was no alternative; Agent Morris gave the signal to turn off the engine. The ghost continued its slow march to the field. It was the most bizarre picture – a circle of armed officers moving along with the huge white ghost, husbands and family members held back by more officers, and a lone helicopter sitting a short distance away.

When they got close to the helicopter, Charley slowly positioned

herself to be the first one to reach their destination. When they made it to the open door of the cabin, she was where she needed to be. She knew that Raider had been watching her with a curious look on his face. She hoped that he wouldn't insist on one of the other women going.

"Charley, you're going with me," he said with authority. She heard the other hostages exhale with relief. It was then that Charley realized they had all been holding their breaths. "Drop down and crawl, then up into the chopper." Once Charley was in the helicopter, Raider slipped in next to her, still under the tent. The two remaining hostages were standing on the ground still under the drape and Raider had his gun pointed at Brittany. "Charley," he said in a low voice, "tell the pilot to get out of the cockpit."

"What?" Charley asked in disbelief.

"Tell him I have one gun on the hostages and one at the back of his seat." Charley repeated his instructions.

"I need to fly you out of here," the pilot argued, refusing to leave. Raider fired a shot through the back of the seat. The pilot was hit in his shoulder. Raider had missed the bulletproof vest and ripped a hole in the man's flesh. The SWAT pilot could not get a clear shot at Raider. He was losing blood quickly and was forced to abort the mission. He jumped from the cockpit. Charley's ears were still ringing from the gunshot.

"Charley, get up to the cockpit and shut the door." He then barked orders telling her how to start the engine. She could feel the vibration of the main rotor beginning to turn. Raider shoved the remaining hostages away from the copter, and slammed the door shut. He moved up to the cockpit and pushed Charley against the pilot's door. She shielded him from the officer's line of fire. He sat on the edge of her seat, and grabbed the controls. Charley could see the officers running toward the helicopter, shooting at the main rotor, and then felt the copter lifting off the ground. She assumed that the woman stomping the ground was Agent Morris.

"You've flown one of these before?" Charley asked with her heart in her throat.

"Yep, for Uncle Sam. I was in Iraq until my discharge." Once they were in the air and the field was behind them, Raider moved between the seats and ordered Charley to slide over to the other chair. The

RAIDER'S Vendetta

helicopter pitched as she struggled to obey.

“Dammit, be careful.”

They sat quietly as they flew through the darkening sky. So many questions and fears raced through Charley’s mind. Her journey to this seat, next to this criminal, felt surreal. Finally she dared to ask, “So, what are you going to do with me?”

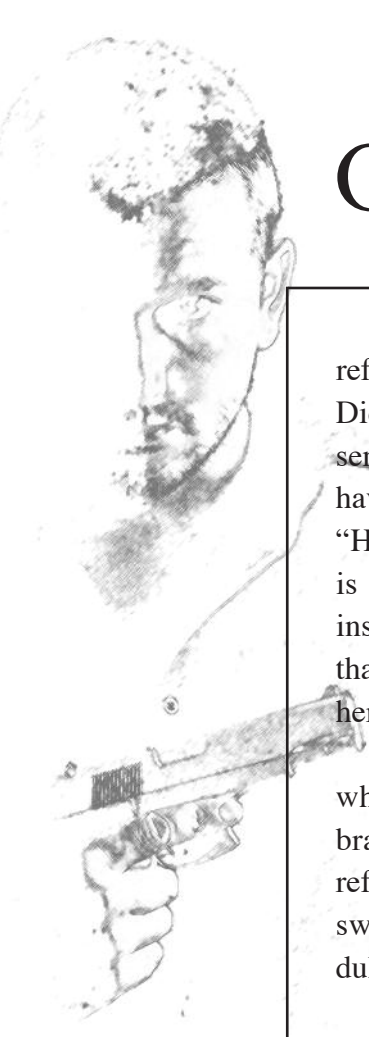
“Do you really care?”

“Of course I care.”

“You don’t act like someone who cares. I can’t figure out your game.”

“I don’t have a game,” Charley responded.

“Everyone has a game,” Raider said with conviction.

A detailed pencil sketch of a man's face, shown in profile from the nose up. He has a beard and mustache. Below the face, a hand is shown holding a handgun, with the barrel pointing towards the left. The sketch is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping the text area.

Chapter 7

Charley turned to look out the window. In the reflection, she saw Raider pull off his mask. She froze. Did this mean he was going to kill her? He seemed to sense her fear. “They will figure out who I am once they have Darrell’s body.” Charley looked at him, confused. “He’s my cousin. Don’t talk any more – this thing is probably bugged. You’re safe for now. You are my insurance.” This gave Charley a small amount of hope that she would live. She prayed that God’s plan included her survival.

Raider looked like your average nice guy. He had white, straight teeth and a chiseled jaw line. Charley braved a glimpse of her own face in the window’s reflection. She saw the bruising under her eyes and her swollen jaw. The pain was subsiding, reduced to a dull throb.

It was almost dark and Raider didn’t turn on any lights to guide their way. He seemed to have a destination in mind and wasn’t flying randomly, as someone panicked would do. She watched him search the control panel and he abruptly pulled out some hardware and ripped the wires. “Ahhhhh, they just lost their ears,” he announced proudly.

When the sky was fully dark and filled with stars, Raider explained that they would be jumping from the helicopter.

“No way,” Charlie exclaimed. Her friends had tried to convince her to skydive over the years and she wouldn’t even discuss it. She was in total panic mode.

“You have three choices, old woman. Jump with me, have me shoot you so you die quickly or you can crash

RAIDER'S Vendetta

with the chopper. Up to you, but I'm jumping."

Raider opened a storage bin and pulled out two parachutes. He handed her one. "Put this on," he instructed as he slipped on the other one.

"I'm sure we're hooked up with a tracker. We're going to jump out and let them follow the chopper. We have to get down to the skids before we jump, so the rotor blades don't suck us up. We're going to be over a lake soon. If we don't go now, we'll land in the trees. I will hold on to you until it's time to pull this cord." Raider indicated what she was to pull. Charley nodded. "This one on the other side is your backup chute. Keep your feet down. When you see the water coming up, bring your legs up under you, like you're doing a cannonball. If you land straight legged, you can break them and I'll have to leave you to die. As long as you don't panic, you'll be fine, or dead, which seems to be your wish anyway. A few feet above the water take a deep breath and release this buckle. The parachute floats so if you come up under it, dive back down and swim until you're clear."

Raider appeared to be adjusting the controls. "Move toward the back, Charley." He slid off his seat and seemed to be tinkering with something. He stood up quickly and moved toward the center of the chopper. Charley watched as he slid the door open. Charley was sick to her stomach and barely held down the bile.

"I can't do this!" she whined.

"We only have a few minutes before this bird starts to drop," he warned. Since there was no autopilot, he improvised the best he could. It would only buy them a little time before the copter went down.

Raider shoved the guns into his pants. Charley thought about pushing him out, but how would she land the helicopter? She remembered her phone. The police would talk her down. Raider saw her face light up and her hand go subconsciously to her back pocket. He grabbed her and spun her around before she could react. He pulled the phone out of her pocket and grinned at her, "Nice try." He threw the phone out of the chopper. "Guess you'll have to jump now." He slipped out the door and squatted on the skid.

Charley was so angry. She would survive just so she could kill him. She carefully slid down to the skid and felt Raider's arms wrap around her. The helicopter lurched. "Dear God, please give me wings," she prayed. The next thing she knew she was plummeting toward the earth. In a flash, Raider's arms let go and he floated away. She opened her eyes and saw him pull his cord. She did the same. She felt a strong upward jerk and then she was floating. This wasn't nearly as scary as the free falling. She saw the lake surface below, the star's reflections shimmering like diamonds on the water. Even in her fear, the view was incredibly beautiful. She savored the moment in case it was her last.

Charley was able to remember most of his instructions and she hit the water not nearly as hard as she expected. She felt herself tumbling, like a gymnast rolling across hard mats. She was relieved that she was still alive. When she stopped, she was under water and under the parachute. She freaked out and began flailing as she felt herself getting caught up in the fabric. Panic overtook her. The wet material stuck to her, wrapping around her face. She wasn't getting any air. Suddenly, hands grabbed her ankles and yanked her down. She was breathing water before she realized it, and she felt herself fading.

The next thing she was aware of was retching and vomiting up bile and water. She was lying on the bank of the lake. Raider jumped up and swam out to the parachutes. He drug them back to the shore and was back before Charley realized she could have escaped, though she didn't know where to. "Get up now!" he growled. "We need to roll up these chutes and hide them. It will buy us time if they don't know exactly where we jumped."

Raider moved quickly with his and helped Charley with hers. She half carried and half drug her chute while she followed Raider to a small cave. They had hiked at least a mile from the lake. He knew this area and that comforted Charley. He wasn't a mad man, running scared. He had a plan. Charley was wet, cold, and exhausted. "We'll stay in here till there's light. Even though these chutes are wet, they will help keep us warm." He motioned for Charley to go in first. She had to bend over to clear her head. She hoped she wouldn't meet an animal coming out. She assumed that he wanted to be at the front of the cave to keep her from

RAIDER'S Vendetta

slipping past. His concern was unnecessary because she wasn't about to try and face this wilderness alone.

While in the helicopter, Charley had searched the ground for any sign of civilization, but saw nothing – no lights for miles and miles. In fact, she was worried that he would leave her there so he could move faster. *Was she still his hostage or not? Would he make sure she was safe before disappearing? She knew he wasn't going to kill her. He could've left her in the helicopter or drowning in the lake.* “Crawl into the folds so that you're laying on several and have the rest over you. The layers will keep in your body heat.”

Charley needed some answers, but she couldn't stay awake long enough to ask him anything. She was in the middle of a wonderful dream; she had wings and was flying over a shimmering lake. The sun was above her and birds were flitting around on all sides. She heard God speaking to her. “You have heard me well, my child. Your journey is not yet done. I am with you always.”



Chapter 8

Saturday

Charley felt a stick stabbing at her. “Wake up. We gotta move.” Charley opened her eyes, happy that she was still alive and that Raider had not abandoned her. As she climbed out of the cave, she saw how beautiful the forest was. “Well, I’m glad no bear came back to claim his cave,” Charley said under her breath.

Raider chuckled, “Even if one had, the snoring coming out of there would have scared him off. Lady, you put my cousin to shame, even after he’s drunk himself blind.” Charley felt herself blush. She had started snoring years ago and hated it. She was sure the cave had amplified the noise coming from her. She couldn’t be that loud. Raider continued, “I was worried about being able to stay awake, but you made it impossible to sleep.”

“It kept us safe,” she said dully.

“Well, hope you got on comfortable shoes. We got some walking to do.”

Charley looked around. “This is probably the stupidest thing I’ve done in the last twenty hours, but I have to ask. What exactly are we doing? I don’t know if I’m still a hostage, if you’re going to strand me if I can’t keep up, or if you’ll get me somewhere safe.”

Raider looked at her with no expression. “I don’t know, to tell you the truth. I didn’t sort that part out. The smart thing would be to keep you with me for a while, ‘til things calm down. If the cops find us, I’ll have some leverage. If they don’t, guess I’ll figure that out as we go. Nowhere for you to run to out here. You’ll just get yourself eaten or starve. Let’s get moving and make sure you keep up old woman. I don’t need you as much as you need me.”



Chapter 9

Agent Morris paced in her office. The phone rang and she snatched it. “Give me some news. I’m dying here,” she said to Officer Burns, who was on the other end.

“They didn’t say anything helpful before the equipment was ripped out. Apparently, they jumped before the helicopter crashed. We’re figuring they could’ve jumped out any time after the last conversation was recorded.”

“The woman jumped too?”

“Well, didn’t find any bodies at the crash site, so that’s our best guess. He may have pushed her out once he was clear of the bank.”

“Get the different precincts along their flight path to check for bodies that have fallen from the sky.”

“I would think she was in on this whole thing, but after debriefing the other hostages, it doesn’t seem to fit. They all describe her as this angel that protected them.”

Agent Morris knew this woman wasn’t involved in the robbery. She’d heard the pleading while on the phone. She hadn’t seen this much strength or character since her father was alive.

“Well, have some choppers fly their course and see if there are any likely spots for jumping out of a helicopter, in the dark, with an old woman.” Morris directed before she hung up. It took a very experienced pilot to know how to keep an unoccupied helicopter in the air, but how long would it stay up? she wondered.

Officer Brennan tapped on Agent Morris’s door. “I’ve got the file.” He handed it to Agent Morris. They had discovered who the bank robbers were. The dead

RAIDER'S Vendetta

accomplice was found with his wallet and drivers license in his pocket. Darrell Anderson. Darrell's cousin, Arthur Myers, had been a helicopter pilot in the Air Force up until three years ago. Four years of honored service and then a dishonorable discharge. Darrell had several previous charges for robbery and assault. Arthur only had the discharge against him. Agent Morris had requested his military file last night and was anxious to review it. They certainly could use some helpful information about this man. Once she knew who she was dealing with, Agent Morris felt confident that she could find him no matter where he hid. She knew he was in the Sierra Mountains. He wouldn't be moving unencumbered, dragging his hostage with him. But, she also knew that he had survival training and had survived Iraq for four years.



Chapter 10

“What’s your real name?” asked Charley as they pushed through bushes and vegetation.

Raider looked at the back of her head, debating whether he wanted to answer. “Arthur, but you can still call me Raider.”

“Okay, Raider? You got any family?”

Raider was still trying to size up Charley and her agenda. He played along, for the moment. “Not any more. Mom died when I was young, dad died in prison, aunt raised me, but she’s dead, and now my cousin Darrell is dead. Last relative I know about.”

Heavy silence again. Charley didn’t know where to go from there. She mumbled, “Sorry.” Charley felt her heart pounding and her breathing was labored. She desperately wanted to stop and rest, but feared that Raider would keep moving and leave her alone in the wilderness.

“Let’s stop here,” he announced. “I hear water close by.” They moved a few more feet and arrived at a small stream. The water was clear and refreshing. Charley lay on the ground and sucked in the cold water. Raider squatted down and scooped handfuls into his mouth. “Don’t drink too much or your stomach will cramp up,” he instructed. “I don’t want to be held up cuz you’re puking your guts out.”

Held up? Charley was relieved to know he had a plan. Everything he was doing felt intentional. “Where are we going?” she asked, cautiously.

“You’ll know when we get there. Until then, just shut up and keep up.” With that, he stood and began to move quickly through the shrubbery, still heading south.

Charley was struggling to keep up with him. She was

RAIDER'S Vendetta

glad when the terrain became flat and open, but Raider could also move faster, which put more distance between them. Several times, she lost sight of him and felt herself panic. At one point, she sat down and cried. Charley knew she couldn't catch up. She was exhausted and starving. She felt scared and lost. "Dear Lord, please don't forsake me now. I've done all you've asked. Please Lord, get me home alive," she prayed.

Suddenly, Charley heard a sarcastic laugh. Raider had doubled back and she didn't realize she had been praying aloud. "You're wasting your breath. There is no loving God, you stupid woman. I am your salvation out here. I am your Lord. Beg me old woman. Maybe I'll save you, maybe I won't."

Charley was shocked at his level of animosity. "Well, we have a difference of opinion," she shot back.

"I should have known. You're a Bible thumper! I thought you were gutsy, but you're just another naive, idiot woman who thinks she's on God's mission. I'm guessing that all your antics came from a twisted brain that believes God is talking to you? I should have shot you, not in the leg, but in the head. Put you out of your misery. You could be having tea right now with Jesus."

He was enraged. Charley was concerned that he would shoot her and leave her body for the animals to clean up. She decided not to respond. She stood and began walking in the direction he had gone when he first disappeared. He followed her, cursing and bemoaning his luck. Charley felt his gaze on the back of her head. She cringed and waited to feel her brains explode inside her head. She didn't understand the fury her prayer had unleashed.

She suddenly felt his hand on her arm and he snapped her around. She was facing a man with absolute hatred in his eyes. "How can you be so ignorant and believe the lies? You're just a puppet with no mind of your own. You want it all wrapped up in a pretty package with a big bow. Well, life isn't pretty. It's bloody ugly and you don't get to bypass hell. Hell is now." Charley was at a loss for how to respond. She knew that he was irrational and would lash out at whatever she said, but he was demanding a response.

She shook her arm free from his grasp. "Why do you care what I

believe? You've got it all figured out. There is nothing I can say that will be good enough for you," she said, quietly, without attitude. She continued to walk, hoping he would back off if she didn't argue.

"Don't you dare walk away from me!" Raider screamed. Charley felt his fist come down hard on her upper back. Her knees buckled with the blow and she fell to the ground. She pulled herself into a ball and cried. The pain was intense.

Raider looked at her and hatred spewed from his mouth, "Let's see if your God shows up, if He protects you. Get up and get moving or I'll leave you on your own. The bears will deliver you to your God!"

Charley almost thought she would be better on her own, but slowly obeyed. She struggled to keep up, but found renewed strength. She believed Her God was moving through her.

Raider disappeared through a group of trees. When Charley came to the center of the grove, she saw a canvas cabin. It reminded her of the cabins she'd stayed in as a child at summer camp. The floor and lower walls were wood. The rest of the structure was camouflage canvas. It was faded and tattered at the edges, but appeared to be sound enough to keep out any rain. Raider popped out of the cabin with a big grin. This was obviously his destination.

"We'll be holed up here for a few days. Make yourself comfortable," he said without any sincerity. Raider moved past her and headed into the trees carrying an empty water jug, the kind used in offices. It looked disgusting and Charley hoped he would rinse it out before using it to get water, but she didn't want to ask or suggest anything. The blow to her back was still throbbing and she wanted to be as invisible as possible. Charley looked inside the cabin and was alarmed at how dirty and disgusting everything was. There were several cots, but only one that wasn't torn and rotted through. She smelled the distinct odor of urine. It was unclear how many animals had nested and used this tent for shelter. Other than protection from moisture and rain, this cabin offered no comfort or value. How long did he plan to hide here?

She heard Raider returning with water sloshing in the bottle. She was relieved to see that he had cleaned out the jug before filling it up. He must have seen her relief. "Don't get too excited old girl. It's going

RAIDER'S Vendetta

to cost you! If you don't like the rules, then get God to provide." What was up with him and God? Charley was thinking she would just find water herself and bypass his garbage. "Ahhhhh, I know what you're thinking. Well, you can try to find the water source, but we hid it well. It's a tap on an underground spring. Hope you don't die of thirst before you find it."

"I'm taking the cabin. You can figure out where you'll sleep. Just make sure it's far enough away that your snoring doesn't keep me awake."

Charley knew from his tone that he was punishing her and she didn't understand why. It was as if something snapped in him and she was now a captive for him to torment. Charley wasn't disappointed that she'd have to sleep outside the foul cabin, but she did need to find some protection from the cold night while it was still light. Her stomach growled from hunger and she worried about what she would eat, but she didn't dare ask Raider about food. She hoped that, with some time, his mood would mellow out. She was sure he had things worked out. He had to eat, too.

The woods were thick with trees and, even though it was summer, Charley knew that once the sun began to drop, the temperature would become quite chilly. She tried to remember all the survival shows that her husband Archie had watched, hoping for an idea as she looked around. There were leaves and needles covering the ground and the best plan she could come up with was to make a nest to cushion the ground, and then use leaves to cover herself. She found a cluster of trees that made a bowl of sorts at the bases of their trunks, just the right size for her to curl up in and padded the ground with piles of vegetation. Stepping back, she felt proud of her efforts.

The shade was darkening the sun-filled pockets and there was a noticeable drop in temperature. Charley worked quickly to collect a large pile of leaves next to the nest. She would pull these on top of herself to insulate her from the cold. She considered trying to start a fire, like they did on the TV show *Survivor* that she watched every season, but she knew that Raider would trample it out if she succeeded, or worse. He'd warned her that the forest rangers would see the smoke from miles away during the day. They won't see the smoke at night, but their surveying

planes could possibly see the flames.

Charley quietly went back to the cabin area to see what Raider was up to. She was hoping there would be some food hidden at the site. She found him sitting on the front step of the cabin, looking up from a weathered can of kidney beans. He had opened it with his pocketknife and let the beans slide down his throat. He gave Charley a nasty grin. "Sorry, didn't save you any, figured your God dropped some manna out there in the woods." Charley bit her tongue and sat down a few yards away from him. She didn't want to get within striking distance. "Well, gonna get some sleep. You have a good night out there with all God's creatures. I'm sure He's got your back." Raider stood up and Charley realized that he not only had hidden food, but he was also sitting on a folded blanket. Her face must have shown her frustration, because he gave her a sly smile and began to laugh hysterically as he walked into the cabin. Her anger began to build. She hadn't done a thing to deserve this. Raider tossed the can out the door and she heard the clang of the empty container hit the ground by her feet.

At first Charley was determined not to subject herself to humiliation, but the cramping in her gut was a strong incentive. She picked up the can and carefully slid her finger around the inside, trying to salvage anything that was left. She tried to avoid the jagged metal, where the can had been ripped open, but she was not so lucky. A yelp escaped from her as the deep gash began to bleed. She didn't see Raider, but she was sure that he was just inside, watching her. The few remaining beans and sauce did nothing for the hunger she felt, and she regretted giving him the satisfaction of seeing her desperate. Maybe she would find some berries tomorrow, or chew on some bark. Charley was sure that the survivors had eaten bark, at least on one of the seasons.

Charley slipped away to her nest. She realized that she had tiptoed, a sad effort to conceal her sleeping place from Raider. He probably already knew exactly where she was or at least he would know when she began to snore.

The nest was comfortable at first. Charley wiggled in and plumped up a pile of leaves for a pillow. She then pulled another pile of leaves on top of her. Only her head was exposed to the night air. Her cotton blouse,

RAIDER'S Vendetta

lightweight jeans, and canvas tennies were not going to provide much protection. She prayed that the leaves would keep her toasty warm and dry as she drifted off. Charley remembered to ask God to keep bears and any other of His creatures away from her nest. She also asked that He share Raider's cabin with a few bears. She drifted off with a smile, picturing Raider waking up to a bear licking his face before it ate him.

As the night passed, Charley tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable. The leaves were brittle and crumbled to powder beneath her. The ground was hard and cold. She hadn't thought to remove the small rocks or twigs before piling up the leaves. These small items became large, painful lumps under her weight. The layer of leaves covering her moved and shifted until there was nothing protecting her. She got colder and colder. Charley's exhaustion was the only thing that allowed her to doze. Then the itching started.

First, it was as a tickling sensation, not enough to wake her fully, but then pain replaced the itching and she was suddenly wide-awake. She realized something was biting her. She jumped up and began swatting at the large red ants that seemed to be everywhere. She had to pull off her clothing to wipe off the ants that had crawled in while she lay on the ground. Once she was sure they were all off, she dressed. Her frustration increased when she realized they were still in her clothing. Charley did her best to squash and remove the last of the ants. Her body and face were covered with the burning, itching wounds left by the powerful jaws of these ferocious insects. Charley wasn't sure what to do. It was still dark and she knew sleeping on the ground was not an option. Her exhaustion wouldn't allow her to stand much longer. She didn't want to admit it, but the cabin was looking better and better. She wasn't sure what Raider would do if she tried to slip in, but she had no other options.

Charley tried to be quiet as she crept into the camp area, but in the dark, she stepped on every twig and tripped over every rock. By the time she reached the cabin steps, she was sure every creature was awake for miles around. She hoped Raider wasn't. Her feet found the steps and she moved as silently as a wood nymph until the second step creaked loudly, as if in pain under her girth. Charley froze. She didn't hear anything in the cabin. It felt like an hour passed as she held her breath. No yelling,

no snoring, nothing. Maybe Raider was out in the woods. Maybe nature had called or he'd gone for more food.

Finally, deciding that she couldn't stand on the steps all night, she slipped into the cabin. She attempted to sit down in the front corner without making any more noise, but heard a loud clattering sound as she bumped something in the dark. She held her breath again. "Ants?" was all Raider said.

"Yes," she said, humiliated. Raider laughed and then she heard something coming at her just before it made contact with her face. She grabbed at it and realized it was rough, reeking of mildew and urine. Her best guess was an old burlap bag. Charley wrapped the nasty bag around herself, hoping it would offer some warmth.

Her humiliation and disgust were only surpassed by her confusion about where God was. Why wasn't He protecting her? He should snap this horrible man in half and get her out of here. It appeared that the best she could hope for was some rest. The scratching, the hunger, the stench, and the anger made it impossible for her to get any real sleep.

~

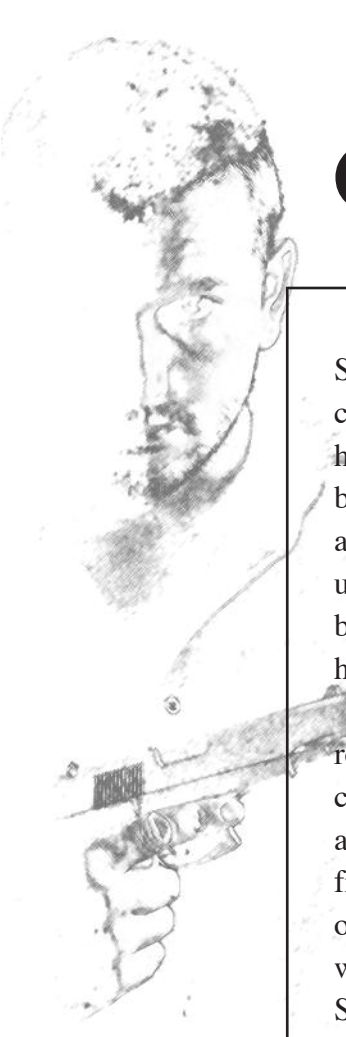
He was in the storage bin. The waves of anger, shame, and hopelessness rippled over him. The prayers spewed out of his mouth. He no longer controlled the useless, empty words. Then the banging, the constant shattering of sound that vibrated through his brain. "Louder, pray louder," the banshee screamed.

Raider jerked out of his nightmare. He hadn't dreamed about the bin in many years. It used to be every night, but he had buried it, gotten it out of his head. Charley was dredging up the insanity that he had struggled so long to suppress. He was angry. She would pay for having her God, the same God that had unleashed Aunt Rose on a powerless little boy.

Light was starting to filter into the cabin. Raider could just make out the shape of Charley in the corner. She was curled up, wrapped in the rotting burlap bag he had thrown at her. He thought about how poisonous this woman with her God was. His dream brought back all the hatred

RAIDER'S Vendetta

that was stored up from the years of hell, all endured in God's name.
He should just shoot her, but what if he needed her? He would enjoy the torment until he hastened her departure to her Jesus.



Chapter 11

Sunday

Charley woke to unbearable itching all over her body. She finally focused her eyes on her arms. They were covered with large, red pustules. She ran her hands over her face and felt more swollen bumps from the nasty ant bites. Her back ached. Her cut finger was swollen, red, and hot. It took several minutes for Charley to get herself up from the cabin floor. She shuddered when she saw the burlap bag in the daylight. It was far worse than she had suspected.

The smell of coffee and, possibly, oatmeal finally registered in her brain. She slowly made her way to the cabin entrance. Raider sat on a campstool, sipping from a tin cup. There was a small camp stove on the ground in front of him. Her nose hadn't betrayed her; she did smell oatmeal. Charley knew she was in enemy territory. She was not only a hostage; she was now a prisoner of war. She had to test the waters carefully. "Thank you for the blanket, ahh, bag," she said cautiously.

"You thought I gave you that? Nahhh, just coughed up some crap in my throat and tossed it as far as I could. Didn't want that filthy thing anywhere around me." He looked at her with such disdain. "But, you're welcome, any time!"

Charley didn't know how to respond. She was smart enough to know that she was not dealing with a rational situation. Nothing had been rational since she went into the bank two days ago. Charley decided not to react or comment. She looked longingly at the oatmeal bubbling on the camp stove. "You want some?" he asked. *Damn*, she thought, her face betrayed her. "Well, if there's any left over, you can have it. But I'm sure God has a

RAIDER'S Vendetta

wonderful meal prepared for you.” Raider dramatically looked around. “Guess He’s running a little late.”

Charley was unable to ignore the raging itch all over her body. She began to rub and lightly scratch. She didn’t want Raider to have the satisfaction of seeing her in discomfort. “Man oh man, did you ever get chewed up. Don’t be scratch’n, you’ll make it worse,” Raider replied with mock concern.

The bottle of water was sitting next to the cabin and Charley was extremely thirsty. She nodded to the water and waited for Raider’s response. “You thirsty? Well, pour yourself a glass,” he said sarcastically. Charley looked around, but there were no cups or glasses except for his coffee mug. She heard him snickering. Charley tried to tilt the jug to get a drink, but the water sloshed out on to the ground. She finally managed to get her hand under the neck while her other hand, arm, and leg balanced the jug. She licked the water from her hand and felt the cool liquid quenching her parched mouth and throat. She wanted more, but she sensed that the less desperate she seemed, the less she would fuel his wrath. She reluctantly set the jug back down. The spilled water had created mud and Charley thought she remembered something about mud helping with bites and itching. She scooped up the wet soil and smeared it all over her face and arms. The cool mud soothed the bites at first, but then a burning began to build. Her eyes teared up.

Raider looked smug from his little stool. “It’s the pine pitch in the dirt that causes the stinging. You’d think it would stop eventually, but nope, nasty stuff. Stupid, stupid woman.” Charley wanted to scream at him, curse at him, throw something at him, but she stood up and just glared at him. She had hoped he was lying, but the stinging was not subsiding.

Charley realized that he was eating the oatmeal from the pot. He was dipping his fingers in and licking off the sticky goo. He grinned at Charley, an evil ‘screw you’ grin. She salivated and licked her lips before she could stop herself. *Damn, damn* she thought again. He grinned even bigger. She stood there, mesmerized with each finger full. She didn’t want to watch, but she was no longer in control. Hunger and the need to survive took over. He stopped and looked into the pan. “Oh dear, I must

have been hungrier than I thought. I sure didn't leave much." He had said much, not that he didn't leave any. He clearly said much. She felt her tongue slide over her lips again. *Damn!*

Raider stood up and walked toward her, stretching out his arm with the glorious pot. As Charley reached to pluck the tasty treat from his hand, her fingertips felt the lingering heat of the metal. Then she heard herself screaming, "Nooooooooo!" Raider had shot her a nasty grin and intentionally let go of the pot. The pot was falling to the ground, flipping over, oatmeal flying out to land in the dirt. It appeared to happen in slow motion, but it was only moments before the pot bounced on the ground. Charley dropped to her knees, sobbing. It wasn't just the oatmeal anymore; it brought back the memory of the loss of her sweet husband, Archie, and the practical jokes he had once played on her. She needed him now more than ever.

Archie had showed up for a date and held out a wrapped gift for Charley. "Happy Anniversary!" he said with way too much enthusiasm. Charley was unexpectedly touched that he remembered their one-month dating anniversary, but she was also annoyed. She was too old for this goofy stuff and hadn't even considered getting him a gift. If they survived a year, maybe a card. She stepped back with a hollow apology for not getting him anything, but Archie insisted that she take his gift. She didn't want to hurt his feelings since he was grinning like a baboon. He was so pleased with himself. Charley reached out for the garishly wrapped tribute and, as her fingertips touched the cool surface of the magenta foil sprinkled with huge daisies, Archie let go. The audible shout of his "Careful!" and her "No!" filled the kitchen. Next was the sudden shot of bile that climbed up her throat. She saw the horror in his eyes as the package hit the floor and the sound of shattering glass was deafening. What the heck had he bought her? It sounded like a chandelier had plummeted to the floor. Archie stood there; arms limp at his sides, shaking his head. "Charley, I can't believe you dropped it. I spent a fortune on that custom blown-glass fairy."

Charley's emotions were flying everywhere, regret, embarrassment, disappointment, and finally anger. "I dropped it? Me? You didn't even

RAIDER'S Vendetta

hand it to me. You let go! Don't blame me!" Charley picked up the box, still looking perfectly fine on the outside, but a testing shake made her cringe at the sound of the shattered gift. Charley set the box on the kitchen counter and slowly untied the ribbon, then pulled away the obnoxious wrapping paper. She expected to see a traditional white gift box used by boutiques, but instead it was a hot chocolate box. Charley looked at Archie confused, but he just looked away, shaking his head.

When she opened the box to view the devastated glass fairy, she found instead a large glass mayonnaise jar. When she picked up the jar, she saw that it contained broken light bulb glass and a very large metal bolt. As her brain tried to sort out the contradiction between her eyes and her expectations, she realized Archie was howling with laughter. Then revelation... "You brat!" she said with venom. "That was so not cool!" Archie tried to stifle his wails, which converted to chuckles, tears running down his cheeks. He moved in closer to hug Charley as she brought her hands up to his chest, holding him back. She glared at him, but then felt the anger melting away. Charley realized that she was laughing, quietly at first, and then deep, joyful peals. She pulled Archie in close to her and held on.

"You should have seen your face!" Archie said through his own laughter.

"I'm still mad at you! That was mean!" Charley said without any conviction. "You owe me big time now. You thought that fairy was expensive, just wait till you see the dinner bill."

"Okay, doll. Get all gussied up and we'll head over to McDonalds," Archie cooed with a huge grin.

"Dream on baby, you're taking me to Stuart Anderson's! I'm having appetizers and dessert! Hope your entertainment was worth it!"

"Dang, baby, I think the fairy would have been cheaper," Charley heard Archie mutter as she headed into her room to discard the jeans and T-shirt for an outfit more appropriate for an expensive dinner.

Charley saw the oatmeal scattered all over the dirt. Raider knelt down next to her and said in a hateful, low voice. "You clumsy, stupid old woman. Better eat it before the bugs show up." He paused and, with all

the venom possible, asked her, “Where is your God?” As he stood up and stepped away, he purposely kicked dirt onto the oatmeal.

Charley let the sobs escape. She didn’t care what he thought. She didn’t care if he hit her again. It wasn’t possible to feel any more pain anyway. Maybe he would shoot her. That worked for her. She would check out and move on to Heaven, a place of love, joy, and food. Yes, food. She was sure that people ate in Heaven. God would not let humans suffer for eternity without chocolate. After the crying subsided, Charley rocked herself with her eyes closed. She felt better in a strange way, but exhausted. She opened her eyes and saw scouting ants dangerously close to her oatmeal. She took a deep breath and decided to be strong, strong until she died. She bowed her head and loudly thanked God for the oatmeal. She scooped up what she could and ate it dirt and all. She checked out the pan and repeated the task she had used with the bean can. She managed to get some oatmeal minus the dirt. She was glad that she had saved the pan for last. It cleared the taste of the dirt and she had delicious oatmeal to savor.

~

Raider leaned against a tree and watched the show. He wasn’t sure what Charley would do. He knew she was breaking, but he also knew she was tough. She’d proven that over and over again. He was impressed when she ate the oatmeal, but was furious that she thanked God for the filth he left her. Not only had she prayed, but out loud, so he would hear. Ballsy! Raider wasn’t sure if he should respond or just wait and pace his attacks, so they did the most damage. He decided to wait.



Chapter 12

Charley walked away from the cabin, found some sunlight, and sat down. She enjoyed the warmth as she tried not to scratch. Raider was wrong; the burning did stop after a while. The mud soothed the itch. She was still covered with bites under her clothing and there was not enough mud to cover them all. She wasn't going to test Raider by trying to make more. Not right now anyway. Raider was clearly a violent and desperate man. But since her prayer, he had become hateful and filled with rage. She couldn't imagine why her prayer would trigger this behavior. Charley relaxed in the warmth of the sun and felt herself becoming peaceful. "Lord, I have no idea what the plan is. I don't know how long I will be here or what I will be required to do. I want to do your will, but Lord I'm tired, hungry, and in such physical pain. I need to know that you have not forsaken me. I know I'm not supposed to think that, but it's hard when you're up to your neck in crap alongside a maniac. I know he's your kid, but he is a maniac! I pray for your guidance and protection, God. Please give me strength and peace to know that You are always in charge."

Charley heard some birds chirping and fluttering a short distance away. She felt that they were talking to her. She got up and followed the sound. There were several apple trees in a sun-filled opening of the forest. Charley didn't want to get too excited. If the apples were green, they would only cause more discomfort. She got close enough to see that the birds were eating their fill. The apples were beautiful, small but plump and deep red. Charley pulled one off and bit into it. It was juicy and sweet. The tears rolled down her face as she thanked God

RAIDER'S Vendetta

for this gift. After eating her fill, she lay down under the trees and looked up through the branches into the sunlight. She felt at peace.

As she drifted in and out, a brain flash hit her. She knew that the Holy Spirit was speaking to her. It wasn't audible, but it was not her thought. "Take apples to my son." Charley jumped out of her stupor and literally yelled out, "No way!" She was shaking with anger. How could she be asked to reward that animal? He will pick them all and not let her have any more. She prayed under her breath. "Lead him to the apples if you want him to have them. I can't do this." She waited, nothing. She tried to convince herself that she'd misunderstood the request from God. He would want this man to suffer, not reward him, wouldn't He?

Shame began to slip in. He had just led her to nourishment. He clearly requested something from her. Did she trust Him or not? Why would she listen and stay in the bank, but question Him now? Its just apples, not her life. A pang of realization hit her. She hated this man. She couldn't see him as God's kid. She let her own fear and anger blind her vision, her faith. "Okay God, I'll do it." She thought she would feel His grace by her obedience, but she didn't feel any better. The guilt remained. Then it became clear to her, "Please forgive me, God. I will do my best to love him and see him as your son. I am sorry for questioning your wisdom." Charley then felt the Holy Spirit swirl within her, filling her with love and renewed strength.

~

When Raider saw Charley coming back into camp, her shirt filled with apples, he almost fell over. She poured the apples out onto the ground by the camp stove. "Take as many as you'd like," she said. She wanted to say, "God's gift to us," but refrained. She knew that she would be challenging him, and God clearly wanted this to be a gesture from her. Raider walked over to the apples and picked one up. He inspected it carefully. Charley picked up another and sat on the step of the cabin. She bit in and let the juice run down her chin. The look of satisfaction was clear on her face.

Raider took a bite and chewed slowly while looking at her

suspiciously. She ignored him and continued to enjoy her apple. Raider had almost finished his sixth apple when he threw it to the ground. He wiped the juice from his hands on his pants and sat down on the stool. He would glance into the woods, at Charley, and then to the apples. She remained quiet and just waited.

Finally he asked, “Why?”

Charley understood his question, but she wanted to open dialogue. “Why what?”

“Why did you share the apples? You could have kept them hidden, at least until I followed you to figure out why you weren’t drooling over my oatmeal anymore.”

Charley started to tell him about the Holy Spirit but she got a clear check in her spirit that she was not to share that yet. “We are both stuck out here, hungry. Figured you knew about the trees anyway.”

~

Raider hadn’t. He would’ve snagged the apples the first day if he knew they were there. He hated oatmeal. It was Darrell’s idea to stash oatmeal. The perfect food he said. You can live on oatmeal and beans for years. Darrel had read that somewhere. Raider got up and left the site, heading the opposite way from the trees. He looped around and headed into the forest in the direction that Charley had come from with the apples. He had to find the apple trees and didn’t want her to know he was searching. There should not be any apple trees with ripe fruit in this area of the forest. He gave up after several hours, and decided to follow her the next time she went out. It didn’t make any sense. She was old and out of shape. She couldn’t have walked far or into any remote areas.

~

Charley wasn’t sure where he went or how long he’d be gone. *That was it, God?* she thought. She made the huge gesture to share and she didn’t even get a thank you?

Charley decided to take advantage of her energy and the daylight.

RAIDER'S Vendetta

She went into the cabin and cringed when she clearly saw the area where she had slept. She tossed the burlap bag out. It didn't provide any warmth anyway. She would have preferred to sleep outside, but didn't want to be bait for insects or animals. Raider was in the cabin at night and armed. If anything decided to eat them for a midnight snack, he would shoot it.

After clearing and cleaning her corner the best she could, she searched the outside area around the cabin for anything that would cushion the floor, anything that wasn't infested with insects. There were plenty of pine needles, but she didn't see any advantage to hauling them into the cabin. They would only poke and jab her already tender skin. More mudpacks had been applied to the bites, but she was still fighting the urge to scratch. The cut on her hand was swelling at an alarming rate. She used some of the water to rinse the wound and wrapped it with a torn strip from her shirt. She sat in the corner, head on her knees, and cried. There was nothing to buffer the extreme conditions she was forced to deal with.

Charley managed to doze on and off, jumping with every unfamiliar sound in the forest. The air was muggy and Charley's arthritis screamed rain. As the storm moved in, the wind made eerie melodies in the trees. She dreaded the night. She knew that she would be cold, in pain, and miserable in her corner of the cabin. Hunger pains were beginning to creep in again and Charley decided to bring some of the apples into the cabin before the rain started. As she collected the fruit, Raider came back into camp. Even he looked annoyed as he looked up into the sky. Charley didn't say anything. She didn't want to cause his anger to flare. She didn't want to be outside in this weather, either. At least the roof and walls would keep out the rain.

Raider grabbed the camp stove, pan, stool, and cup and brought them into the cabin. Without any comment, he left the area again. Charley considered following him, but she realized that she didn't care. She would eat her apples, huddle up in her corner, and try to sleep. Suddenly, the cabin glowed brightly as lightening flashed across the sky. Her dread began to manifest into fear. The smell of electricity was strong and menacing.

A short time later, Raider came bursting into the cabin, just as a peal

of thunder ripped through the mountains. He missed the downpour that pounded the ground outside by seconds. Charley looked up and was shocked to see that he was carrying another blanket and several cans of soup. Hoping for some of the food was just too risky and she put her head back down on her knees. She was sure the second blanket was to protect him from the cold and dampness. She allowed herself a small prayer that he would take pity on her, even if only for the duration of the storm.

~

Raider had intended to taunt Charley, to let her think he was going to be generous, and then snatch it away. That's what he wanted to do. This stupid woman who believed in a God that cared. He wanted her to cry out and find that she was alone. No one would come saving the day. She had shared the apples, which did surprise him, but not enough to show her mercy.

Once the camp stove was lit, he dumped the soup into a pan to heat. The smell filled the cabin and Raider knew she was hungry for something more filling than apples. His plan of torment would begin.

"Charley, so I'm confused. You're sitting there covered in bites, cold, and miserable. Why hasn't God saved you? Doesn't it make you mad, just a little?"

Charley didn't take the bait. No response.

"Just what I thought. You don't have anything to say because you know I'm right. You're mad as hell. You figured he would have brought in the cavalry by now. I'd be in the back of a squad car and you'd be on your way home to a nice warm bed. You've figured out that He's just a story to keep everyone in line." He watched her out of the corner of his eye to see if she was biting. He stirred the soup and took a taste, letting the slurping sound fill the cabin.

~

Charley was mad, not at God, but at this moron. She knew if she

RAIDER'S Vendetta

spoke, they would be into it and she didn't want to risk making him mad. She wouldn't make him mad, not tonight, but she knew if she ignored him, he would kick her out anyway. Obviously, he wanted a fight. She whispered a prayer for wisdom and began. "Well, as I see it, God is providing. I survived the bank, I survived the jump into the lake, I haven't been eaten, and I found lovely apples today. I would say that God is all around me."

Raider began to laugh hysterically. "You ignorant hag. I kept you safe in that bank. I carried you down to the water and still had to save you from drowning. You're so old and rank, no animal would want you unless they were starving, and you lucked out on the apples. As I see it, you should be kneeling to me. I'm the reason you're still alive!"

"Just goes to show you that God can do miracles. He can use anyone to do His will." Charley realized too late that this was not a wise comeback. She looked up briefly to see if he was going to attack, but Raider remained seated. In fact, he was staring at her with curiosity.

"You believe He used me? Like I'm some puppet that can be controlled?"

"No, not like that. But, He can speak to hearts, plant grace when it's needed."

Raider was quiet, and then spoke with sarcasm. "You believe this crap. You tell me how you know God is real. If I like your answer, I might share my soup."

"You aren't going to accept anything I say. I don't know who hurt you or how, but you want to humiliate me and it goes way past me being a stupid, old, Christian woman. This is personal."

~

Raider was fuming. He knew it was personal. He had dreamed about the bin last night for the first time in years. This woman dredged up all the pain and shame he suffered at the hands of a devout Christian woman. He felt himself getting mean and he looked forward to making her pay.

"Maybe not, but worth a try, right? You could convert me. Wouldn't that be a real blessing? You could brag to all your churchy friends when

you encourage them to come visit me in prison. Cuz you know once I found the Lord, I'd turn myself in and do the time. Then I would have salvation and live for eternity in Heaven with all the pretty angels."

~

Charley was shocked. This guy had been exposed to church at some point. His sarcasm revealed understanding of Biblical teaching. But, he was angry, furious. He had tried to lighten his words with feigned humor, but the hatred had seethed under the surface. "Look, why do you care why I believe. You don't and that's your right. We both know I'm not going to convert you to anything."

"What happened to miracles, Charley? Bible says no man is hopeless. You saying you don't believe I can be saved?"

"Not here, not now, not by me. This is all a game. You want me to set myself up and then you're just going to rip apart anything I say. No thank you!"

"So sad, Charley. You can't even defend your God. You won't even try. Guess I'm stronger than your faith or understanding if you're so afraid of what I'll say. You afraid I'll convert you?"

"It's not what you'll say, you ass. It's you getting angry and throwing me out in the storm. Just leave me alone and let me huddle in this damn corner." Charley knew as soon as she spoke the truth, she was screwed. His face lit up in satisfaction.

"Ohhhhhhh, Charley does have some fight left in her." Raider shifted on his stool, like someone settling in for a long encounter.

Damn, damn, damn, thought Charley.

"Make you a deal. For every question you answer, I'll give you a bite of soup." Raider seemed almost giddy with the prospect of shattering this woman's reality.

Charley knew he was not going to leave her alone and she didn't want to go out in the storm. If she got a few bites of soup, that was better than being hammered by him all night for nothing. She gave in.