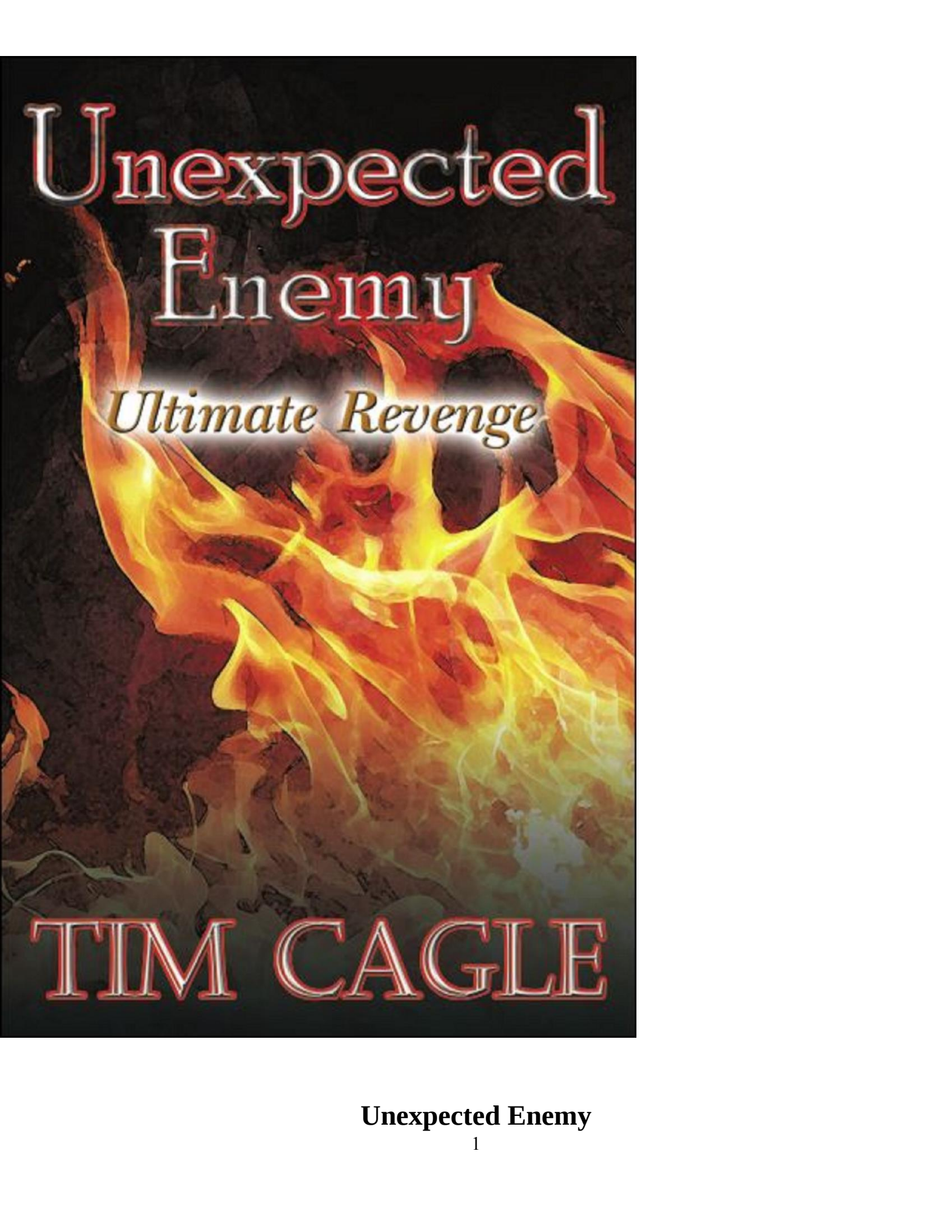




Unexpected Enemy

Ultimate Revenge

TIM CAGLE

Unexpected Enemy

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Dedication

To those who turn the other cheek to hide the flames from a distant fire.....

“If you want to test someone’s character, give them power.”

Abraham Lincoln

Chapter One

Monday, October 13

The cemetery was located in Chelsea, a blue-collar suburb north of Boston. The entrance consisted of a dirt road on a hilltop leading to a tree-lined meadow. Weathered fieldstone and granite markers dating back to colonial times formed asymmetrical rows. Most were in disrepair.

Just before eleven, Ann Sorenson drove through the rusted gates. She looked in the rearview mirror as Ricki arrived. After exchanging hugs, they approached a headstone in the last row that looked freshly carved and polished. Ann bent slightly and placed the bouquet of daisies on the grave. A soft gust of wind sent a crimson and gold leaf fluttering past the inscription.

Andrea Curtis Perryman

Born: October 13, 1980

Died: July 10, 2008

"Thanks for meeting me," Ann said.

"The least I could do on your birthday," said Ricki, nodding toward the date on the marker.

"Andi was more than my twin. She used to say we were symbiotic survivors," said Ann, as an image of pallbearers lugging her sister's white casket formed. She could almost taste the tears as she remembered the day Andi found a lump in her breast. The doctor said not to worry; it was fibrocystic disease. She was too young to have cancer. Andrea died a few months before she turned twenty-eight.

Ann ran her thumbs beneath the creases where her eyelids met in a halfhearted swipe to neutralize her tears. A thin lock of blond hair fell in front of her blue eyes.

"Are you feeling OK?" asked Ricki, glancing at Ann's swollen belly.

"Mostly mood swings and nausea. But that all ends in another month," said Ann, visualizing the former office she had transformed into a nursery. She could almost bask in the scent of fresh paint from the periwinkle walls covered with animal decals.

"Thank God Lee Harlow is my doctor," said Ann. "The shots and fertility treatments I went through will soon be worth it all. He's a genius."

Ricki turned and grasped Ann's arm.

"Has he gone over everything with you? The birth and the aftermath?" asked Ricki.

"Trust me. I'm as ready as I can be. I know exactly what to expect when the baby arrives," said Ann, leaning against Ricki's shoulder and squeezing her right hand.

"This child will change a lot of lives and right a lot of wrongs," said Ricki, as she pulled out a black velvet box. "I was going to wait until the baby came, but you deserve this for your birthday," she said, extending it toward Ann.

Ann opened the box and removed a sterling silver necklace showcasing a pendant the size of a *demitasse* cup rim. It sparkled like a freshly minted coin in the morning sun.

"It's called a *shènglì*. It's the Chinese symbol for victory," said Ricki.

The symbol consisted of four characters. Ann was struck by the fact that the first one reminded her of a ladder with rungs that demanded ascent. Just like her journey to motherhood.

“Your baby’s birth will be a victory for my brother as well as your sister. I hope you don’t mind, but I bought another one for myself,” said Ricki, showing her an identical medallion.

“I would expect no less from my baby’s godmother,” said Ann, stretching to embrace Ricki, who stood half a head taller, after they each slipped their pendants under their tops.

“When is Steven flying back?” asked Ricki.

“Tonight. He’s in DC for the day. He said he has a special birthday dinner planned in honor of the baby.”

“How is Anthony holding up during the wait?” asked Ricki as Ann looked up and shrugged.

“Like he always does. With dignity and grace.”

“Tell him to stay optimistic,” said Ricki as Ann’s eyes locked with hers and suddenly lit up.

“I just realized I’m a woman with two husbands, and like a matching pair of bookends, neither one is around when I need him,” said Ann as Ricki shot her a quick, mischievous smile.

“They’re typical guys. Instead of double support, you get twice the aggravation,” said Ricki.

“Do you have time for lunch?” asked Ann.

“Rain check. I’m going to be stuck in one of those meetings where you need a penis to get attention, and I don’t have time to grow one,” said Ricki.

“Maybe you can come for dinner this weekend,” said Ann.

“It’s a date. We have a lot to go over to get ready for the baby,” said Ricki as she gave Ann a quick hug before they each drove away.

An hour later, Ann arrived downtown. It was her first time in the city in a few weeks. So far, the day was perfect, punctuated by sounds from the bustling sidewalks and a fall foliage show. Grinning, she saw herself walking through the floor-to-ceiling glass and polished steel skywalk leading from the Prudential Center to Copley Plaza. It provided a panoramic view of Boston’s Back Bay while overlooking chic haute couture boutiques on Newbury and Boylston Streets.

As she left the parking garage, Ann’s face contorted as her belly was jolted by a hard pinch, as if her flesh was wedged between the joint of two jagged-edged planks. She had been battling morning sickness and fatigue, but this time the pain was different, worse than the tingle she’d felt earlier at home. She stopped to steady herself and then the inferno in her belly faded and a feeling of normalcy returned.

The morning air was warming, so Ann slipped her silk scarf from around her neck and placed it in her purse. After entering Saks Fifth Avenue, she headed off to the cosmetics section and stopped at the Chanel counter. Convinced that the pain was gone for good, Ann asked to see the Vitalumière Foundation for ultra light skin and then reached for her credit card.

Smiling broadly, she grinned and ran her right hand over her cotton top until the outline of the silver pendant caressed her fingertips. The gift was an unexpected bonus but certainly not a surprise. Ricki was one of only a few friends Ann had allowed herself to make since she moved

to Boston. After all they had been through together, she had become an older sister. She grinned and pictured Ricki sitting next to her at the symphony or a Patriots' home game when, without warning, the pain brutally struck again, this time like she was impaled.

Ann bit her upper lip as the fire in her belly sizzled. She quivered slightly before bracing herself against a display case. The clerk was about to run her card when Ann clenched her teeth. Suddenly, she knew it was not a passing bout of indigestion.

"Maybe I should come back for the foundation after lunch," said Ann between breaths as her trembling fingers helped stabilize her body against the top of the counter.

A paroxysm of pain sent her reeling to her left against one of the chrome-and-black vinyl chairs. She dropped down to her right knee in a semi-genuflection, pressed her right hand against the cosmetics case, and brought her left hand to her forehead. The clerk retrieved the phone next to the register and quickly dialed security.

"Ve have a coos-tomer who's eel at ze Sha-nell counter. Zend halp," said the clerk in an exotic accent before sprinting forward and guiding Ann to the closest chair.

Ann's face distorted in pain as the blast furnace in her belly grew. It felt like a white-hot knife was carving a zipper. Another associate joined the clerk before a security officer arrived and announced an ambulance was on the way. Immediately, the woman holding the card looked at Ann.

"Take eet easy, Mees. Damon," she whispered, looking up from the name on the credit card, before it handing it back.

Anxiety spread over Ann as she bristled at the sound of the surname "Damon." Her health insurance was also in that name, but not her drivers' license. What if the paramedics checked, exposed her dual identities, and started prying?

What if her baby was coming? She would be taken to a strange hospital with an unknown doctor and be bombarded with questions that demanded answers. She could not have her baby with anyone except Dr. Harlow.

Ann's mind raced like she was running from a lynch mob. Trembling, she knew she had to find an escape when another wave of agony made her feel like she had been sucker-punched.

I can be at Harlow's office in less than ten minutes, she thought, scanning the store before focusing on a side exit to the street.

"I need to stop at the ladies' room," she said to the security guard.

"It's in the rear of the store. I'll have to get a female officer to go in with you," he replied.

"You can wait in the corridor," said Ann, staring into his eyes with a pleading look.

The guard nodded and half-carried, half-guided Ann forward. Separate doors for entry and exit sparked an idea. Knowing her ash-blond hair and royal-blue hounds tooth blouse were dead giveaways, she slipped into a stall and whipped off her top. Then she reversed it to its muted-color side. After tying the scarf over her hair, she donned sunglasses and barely inched open the exit door. The guard had his back turned and was speaking into his radio.

At that moment, two women moved past her toward the entrance, chattering up a storm as they strolled together. Clutching her stomach with one hand and her purse with the other, Ann stepped

out as they passed. Their semi-lockstep movement blocked the guard's view, and less than a dozen steps later, she slipped through the side exit on her way to the parking garage.

After tossing her purse onto the passenger seat, Ann climbed inside and gunned the engine. Instinctively, her eyes were drawn to the groin area of her white maternity pants. A few tiny droplets of blood were growing.

A convoy of cars waited to exit. Ann's pulse soared as she searched for an escape route. Focusing on the deserted monthly parking lane next to her, she whipped the vehicle to the right and sped toward the exit. In a flash, she smashed through the faded yellow-and-black vinyl barrier gate arm, shattering it into multiple pieces, and then fishtailed out onto the street. After hanging a sharp left, she headed for the ramp leading to the turnpike westbound. The clatter of horns filled the air as the cashier ran from the booth into the street and pointed his phone at her license plate.

Ann reached for her cell. Her belly began to swell as though ready to burst.

"Artemis Associates. Judy speaking."

"This is Ann Sorenson. I'm a patient of Dr. Harlow's. I'm in terrible pain and just started bleeding," shouted Ann, swerving to avoid sideswiping a delivery truck.

"Did you call for an ambulance?"

"No. I have to talk to Dr. Harlow."

"He's in surgery. Let me get you an ambulance. Give me your location," said Judy.

"No time. I'm on my way," yelled Ann, ending the call.

Ricki will know exactly what to do, thought Ann, as she decided to text even though she knew there would be no answer. The up and down motion caused Ann to swerve twice as she tried to concentrate. Her message was sent to Ricki's burn phone.

Body on fire... baby coming... going to doctor... get me help!!!

With her heart skipping a beat, she sped through the restricted E-Z pass lane, activating the sirens and flashing lights. Another wave of agony made her glance at her belly, a move that made her drift toward the breakdown lane. Her front wheel struck the rumble strip, and the nail-gun pneumatic sound of tires on uneven metal caused her to swerve into the high-speed travel lane. The bloodstain had grown to the size of a saucer.

Ann merged with the remnants of the morning rush-hour commute and tried to stay steady. Suddenly, a different kind of sticky sensation began to ooze from between her legs. Terrified, she touched the tops of her thighs and watched the moisture soak her fingertips. This time, the droplets had a slight sheen and carried a distinctly sweet smell. She remembered that scent from when Dr. Harlow analyzed a sample of her amniotic fluid—a substance her baby needed to live.

The tollbooth was only a few hundred yards in front of her. Instead of slowing down, Ann gunned her engine and headed for a deserted lane. The collector ducked down as she blew by the booth, which shook for a few seconds as though struck by a hurricane-force wind.

After Ann cleared the exit, she entered the rotary and took the first right. The entrance to the fertility clinic was barely one hundred yards ahead, adjacent to the hospital. Two dozen protesters were carrying signs and placards as they marched and chanted in front.

A uniformed security guard was patrolling beside a set of orange-colored barrel barriers and stopping each vehicle for a mandatory security check. The guard began pumping his hands with palms thrust downward toward Ann as she drifted out of consciousness. The guard dove for cover as she blasted through the barriers, leaving each one in splintered chunks and triggering a full-scale alert. Protesters scattered in all directions like stampeding cattle as abandoned signs flew toward the flanks.

She awoke and then cried out loud as her vehicle headed straight toward a young mother pushing an infant in a stroller. As the car drifted directly toward them, Ann marshaled all of her strength and flung the steering wheel hard to the left as her foot slipped from the brake pedal. Mom and baby were safe, but the swerve caused the vehicle to oversteer and slam into the glass doors. It came to rest inside the vestibule.

The crash sounded like an exploding artillery shell as it wiped out the entire front of the entrance. Shards of glass, clumps of sheetrock, and pieces of twisted metal covered the crumpled hood and windshield. Screams of terror filled the room as memories of the Boston Marathon bombing caused people to panic.

There were two-dozen patients and visitors in the waiting area, and the noise dispersed the crowd. The guard arrived with his gun drawn, speaking loudly into his radio in response to the security alert he had broadcast. His hands shook as he pointed the weapon at Ann who was slumped over the deployed airbag.

“Freeze,” he shouted, bringing his left hand up to steady his trembling grip.

Ann inched her door open. The guard’s hands relaxed slightly at the sight of her top, which showed him she was in such a panic she had put it on inside out. Her bloodstained white pants told him she was in trouble. She managed only a single step, before collapsing onto piles of crash-formed debris. A quick look at her bruised, sweaty face and distended belly confirmed that she posed no further threat.

“We’ve got a medical emergency,” he shouted.

As the receptionist dialed the phone, three people dressed in pale-blue scrub clothing ran out of the elevator. They were pushing a gurney and led by a woman wearing street clothes under a white lab coat. Her nametag read “Judith Davis, RN.”

“That woman is Ann Sorenson. She’s Dr. Harlow’s patient,” said Judith to the guard, removing her phone and dialing the operating room.

The team loaded Ann onto the gurney. They began to collect vital signs before rushing her toward the elevator.

“It looks like she’s going into labor,” called one of the attendants.

Ann tried to navigate as she was wheeled through the hallway on her way to the second floor. Her face was bruised and puffy from the airbag. With a feeling of joy because she made it to Harlow’s office, she watched rows of ceiling tiles rush by. She cried out loud as one final violent stab of pain seared up and across her belly before she again lapsed into unconsciousness.

As the medical team departed the crash site, maintenance workers arrived to fortify the entrance. Outside, the bomb detection unit appeared along with television news reporters.