

Chapter 1

6:55 AM

Jenny's hardened gaze cuts through the murk of darkness. A large framed man outlined by a thin aura from a faraway light looms before her, his face partially obscured by shadow. The ratchet sound of a bullet entering the firing chamber screams across the night. She jabs the .38 into his chest thumping the muzzle hard against his breastbone.

Stay away from me you fuckin' pervert.

Raising his hands, he retreats half a step. Jenny, you know I love you, his voice is low, raspy, laced with a hint of deceit.

Bullshit! Distracted by a perceived movement in the shadows, she darts a nervous glance to the left.

He grabs the gun by the barrel wrenching it down and to the side. Her finger drags along the trigger as the .38 is torn from her hand. A bullet ricochets into the darkness.

A blur of arm and weapon whips against her jaw. She lands in a crumpled mass upon the floor, her jaw wet, warm with blood. Her mouth aches. A tooth is loose.

She struggles to stand while suppressing the rising nausea. Wiping the trail of blood with the back of her hand, the sting of perspiration drives down the urge to vomit. She charges forward.

The butt of the .38 is driven hard between her shoulder blades. A wave of pain settles in her heart. She drops to one knee though still manages a stiff punch into his groin. He doubles over, drops to his knees. The gun thuds to the floor.

Her hand slaps down upon the weapon as she scrambles to reclaim it.

Snatching it away, she pulls the black steel tight against her chest, smearing a gruesome mix of blood and sweat upon the grips.

She staggers to her feet, and in half a stride stands over him, casting her predatory glare into tired eyes laced with pain and fear.

Forcing the barrel into his mouth, she pauses, delighting in how the crude blend of light and shadow accentuates the knowledge of his pending doom. The stutter of teeth upon the muzzle sets fire to adrenaline already at a level beyond her control. A slow sigh of victory escapes her lips as her finger draws taut about the trigger. Vengeance will finally be served.

"It's seven o'clock!"

The friendly energetic voice emanating from the clock radio jolts Jennifer Thompson away from her morbid fantasy. In recent weeks this disturbing brand of retribution has been simmering between her ears. Even restful slumber is difficult to come by now that her nightmares bleed as well.

"Good morning to all my AM Country WKKB listeners. Sunny Steve Miller here on this beautiful September Monday ready to help you get out and about. Throw back those covers, stagger into the kitchen, and pour yourself a fresh hot cup of java. The WKKB weatherman calls for a high of sixty-two degrees with some 50 per cent humidity thrown in for good measure. A fine day to enjoy what's left of summer. Right now, lets mosey on back to August 1963, with the Man in Black . . ."

"I hate that fuckin' song."

Mariachi horns wail the first few bars. She eases against the night stand, pressing the business end of the .38 to the snooze button putting a temporary muzzle on good old Sunny Steve and his early morning glee.

Mid-September air drifts through the partially open window nudging the blinds into a slow lethargic sway. She stands before the window allowing a gentle wave of early morning coolness to flow across her nakedness, a small measure of relief to seemingly endless nights filled with gruesome nightmares that spill over into her waking hours. She peeks between the louvers, expelling a long sigh steeped in frustration.

During these quiet lonely moments, when her thoughts wander, her fixation on the weapon returns. These are the times when she perceives a soft voice, unintelligible, barely audible, in the quiet of the bedroom. The whisper dissipates, but the daydreams linger on.

The dark scenes are in sharp contrast to her pale skin and yellow hair. Her victim appears in silhouette, his voice is unfamiliar. She never remembers pulling the trigger, but her hand, splattered in the blood of dreams, fuels her passion, branding her with a desire for revenge.

Her thoughts return to the present.

Her gaze shifts toward the sun, that only minutes ago, cleared the trees at the far end of the street. She squints, filtering the rays of glare between her fingers, that now stab their way through the blinds. Any glimpse of her '64 Mustang and its coat of *candy apple red* is washed away.

The Mustang is the second bit of freedom she has left. It sits there, calling to her, persuading her to abandon the craziness that has become her way of life.

Where can I go? A silent question that cries from within more times than she cares to imagine. Still, the answer eludes her.

The first bit of freedom, of course, is the .38 and its power over life and death. Frightening and alluring, she never sought out this power, but it has found her, and some way she must fight urges that promise only the destruction of those around her, urges that persuade her to act contrary to reason.

Both car and gun must wait. Wait until the time is right.

When will that be? The words are old, worn out. *I guess I'm more like Uncle Mark than I care to admit. We must be the world's worst procrastinators. But what a pair.*

She holds the .38 firmly against her chest, pressing into a nipple taut from the cool morning air. Naked, petite, vulnerable to the eye of man, her body has been slow to accept the gun's influence.

This will make me strong.

A faint smile chips away at her stoic expression.

If it were my way, the two of us would hit the road, me and my candy apple Mustang, and he in his chromed out Harley. A .38 at my side, a .44 magnum at his. Yeah, we could do it up right.

This is the part of her world where she is safest, protected from the onslaught of instability of the business world, and the unbridled emotions of family.

Then why do I feel like shit?

She casts a tired gaze about the bedroom. Against the wall beneath the window is the only remaining item of furniture, the night stand, with its sole companion, the clock radio. Adjacent the night stand lay the old mattress and box spring. The frame sits heavy into the carpet causing the fresh plush pile to rise along the edge giving an appearance of the encroaching growth of a tiny forest. Neatly tucked corners of satin sheets are pulled free from beneath the mattress adding substance to her restless nights.

Along the baseboard, opposite the foot of the mattress, are the contents of the old dressers, scattered in mild disarray. Her husband's personal things are closest to the doorway leading to the living room. Unlike Jenny's side, the

collection of underwear, shirts, and socks are intertwined with business cards, brochures, and receipts, all of which is reflected in the full length mirror propped against the wall adjacent the master bathroom.

"Should never have let Liz talk me into redecorating this friggin' place," she says to a room appearing deserted and ransacked. "I know she's only trying to help." Jenny shakes her head wishing it would all disappear. "I guess if Liz can't, nobody can."

Her gaze returns to the center of the bedroom doorway that leads into the living room. Already the carpet has been raped of its newness by a thick wad of grease tracked in on her husband's work boots. The thought of scrubbing the ugly blob with only worn pile as a reward further deflates the battered remnants of her self-esteem.

At this angle the stain's reflection is easily seen in the silvery glass of the mirror. It mocks her, the way other improvements made about the house mock her. She absently rubs the lingering stiffness in her right shoulder.

Driving the insult deeper, there is a second smear on the wall next to where Sam's clothes are stacked, softer in tone, though dark enough to be recognized as an image of the man's rear jeans pocket. She shakes her head in frustration.

When the hell did that one show up?

Her brow creases as she tries to remember.

Am I that oblivious? She sighs, admitting to herself that much of what happens goes unnoticed. "You've got a lot of fucking nerve, Samuel Thompson," she says. An image of him putting on his boots while leaning against the wall forms in her mind.

"It doesn't matter anyway," she concedes.

Sam's side of the bed has been steeped in cold indifference for most of the night, the only warmth beneath the covers emitting from her own nakedness as she occasionally tossed from side to side in a never-ending wrestle between wakefulness and nightmares. He leaves in the morning without saying good-bye, a habit that caught on quick and has remained as long as recent memory holds. The only thing worse is when he never comes home at all.

"Seven minutes after the hour of seven," the radio blares, disrupting the flow of her jaded thoughts. Pressing her thigh against the night stand, she reaches toward the radio, .38 in hand, intending to re-silence the alarm though hesitating as Sunny Steve leads into a commercial with a familiar twist.

"Car troubles keeping you from that trip to the shore? Your local Jack Conner Service Center' can get you back on the road in no time. Jack Conner has the equipment and expertise to diagnose and repair whatever ails your car. Mention my name, Sunny Steve, and you'll receive an additional 10 per cent off the final cost of your repairs. Remember. Your friendly Jack Conner

Service Center' reminds you to, 'Hit the Road with Jack'."

"Who does Dad hire to write that crap?" Her grimace at the radio's large red numerals demands an answer. They have since dimmed to the increased glare that seeps between the narrow louvers of the blinds.

"He doesn't even own the fuckin' place anymore," she reprimands Sunny Steve as he cues the next song. The music gets louder, his voice fades.

"Now I understand how Sam feels," she admits, seeing another of the many nails hammered into the wall dividing them.

She touches the gun's muzzle to the snooze button for a second time, but decides instead to slide her thumb along the edge of the clock switching the alarm and the radio off.

Propped against the wall at the end of the loosely tangled mess of dresser contents is a no longer favored Van Gogh print. The spinning stars of the sky are static, suspended, much the same as her own life. The picture has been there since Saturday when she and Liz painted, though has the feel of having been there much longer. Even the fake work of a master accented by fresh paint has no chance in disguising the change in her heart.

"How'd you live without love?" she asks an image of the long dead artist forming in her mind, the picture now largely obscured behind a veil of tears.

A hollow chill sets along her spine as if in reply.

"In a way we're like old friends," she insists.

The vision of the artist fades though her watery gaze never falters from the swirl and twist of the stars. An imaginary wafting breeze stirs several strands of blonde hair that has fallen along her cheek. The artist's world draws closer.

"If I had your courage, I'd put this gun to my head."

A tear breaks along her cheek, falling between her thumb and the grip of the .38.

"Did those crazy stars make you do it?"

She holds the gun snug to her breast, her thin frame seeming insignificant to the depression that looms overhead. A heavy, stuttering sigh escapes her lips.

"God betrayed me too, Vincent." Her voice cracks to words far colder than any she has ever spoken. "Sam, my companion for better or for worse, has abandoned me, the same way you were abandoned.

"Except I have recourse. My salvation has arrived. It's here, Vincent," she says, snuggling the .38 to her heart, "a present from Smith and Wesson."

The chill in her spine recedes like the closing of a latch, stealing a fragment of her sanity as it departs.

"Leave it to me to own a painting by an artist that hacked off part of his ear for some prostitute," she sighs, shaking her head to fight off the invading depression. She wipes the remnant moisture from her eyes.

A muffled ring of the phone draws her attention away from swirling stars, a severed ear, and her husband's indifference. The phone lies on the floor near Sam's side of the bed where it has been through the upheaval of redecorating. A corner of the blanket has fallen across it, absorbing most of the sound. The receiver has been kicked off the hook a dozen times in the early hours when the phone's black blends into the dark blue carpet. The cord has been reduced to a mismanaged tangle. She stretches across the width of the mattress, allowing the pistol to vanish within a shallow cloud of white satin. Then reaching under the disarray of blankets at the side of the bed, she grabs the receiver.

"Yeah."

"Dude, we on for later?"

She yanks the receiver from her ear. It's Jimmy Reeves, the only person she knows that talks so loud he doesn't need a damn phone. Besides, he's the only one that calls this early.

"This is Jenny."

"Sorry, Jen. Sam up? Wanted to go over what needs to be done on the Chevy."

"That junkard?"

"Antique."

"Whatever. No, he left early." *Well, no surprise there.*

"Ah, sorry again. Catchya later."

The line goes dead. She pauses, questioning the silence as she looks into the earpiece, half anticipating the conversation to ramble on. She hangs up. Stretching out on the bed, she rolls onto her back.

Satin sheets drape loose around her body. She pats the covers close to her hip in a blind search for the .38 and finds it. The black steel feels good to the touch, so reassuring, so powerful, capable of conquering a multitude of evils. She rests the pistol gently against her chest. The heat of her grip has warmed the weapon, bleeding onto her breast, becoming a bizarre nourishment for her soul.

A faint mixture of gun oil and spent powder hovers close by. She holds the muzzle to her nose and takes a satisfying sniff. The scent fills her with an odd intoxication easing the anxiety from unfulfilled nightmares that have been dragging her desperately close to insanity.

At long last the tears are gone. Conquering sorrow, her resolve grows stronger. The options at her disposal necessary to fix her problems have narrowed. Regrettably, soon there will be only one.

She releases the catch and the magazine slides into her hand. She examines the number of rounds.

Full. Good.

She slams it back into place. Engaging the slide, the first bullet enters the firing chamber.

A cool draft wafts across the room from someplace unknown and, for the first time, she feels truly naked. Sitting, she picks up the briefcase that rests against her night stand. Easing it onto her lap, she thumbs the lock. The latch flips open. Absorbed in the texture, weight, and scent of the one thing able to bring her world back, she sets the .38 to rest in the briefcase adjacent the contract papers that need to be gone over at work.

Today, all these leftover legal matters get settled. The last day in a long line of bad ones.

Closing the lid, she secures the latch.

Later, range time. At least there I can think. God knows, I do my best thinking with a gun in my hand.