

CHAPTER 1

What Rigo liked best about his job as a dishwasher was taking out the garbage. This might seem counterintuitive to some people, but it gave him a chance to get away from the hot kitchen and into the balmy air, if only for a few seconds.

He had noticed this joy as a teenager when dishwashing produced his first real paychecks, not just a few small bills handed to him for dog sitting or babysitting. It was still true ten years later as he returned to the minimum-wage job of his youth, using it as a safety net during a recession that had closed down all possibilities of a real job for the proud holder of a newly minted master's degree in psychology.

This was his first garbage run of the day. The brunch crowd was out in force on a sunny Sunday morning. They were better dressed and had fatter wallets than patrons of the typical Southern California restaurant, even if this meant their jeans were clean and they were just managing to make their monthly credit card payments. The recession seemed to affect everyone.

The gate to the wooden-fenced enclosure was unlatched. Carlos had taken his place as dishwasher last night while Rigo attended a tennis tournament. How did Carlos expect to keep out the raccoons, skunks, and possums that roamed the hillsides of the Palos Verdes Peninsula? Rigo would have a word with him. He opened the gate quickly and was happy to see no surprised varmint challenged him or scooted under the Dumpsters.

The green Dumpster lids were closed; at least Carlos had gotten *that* right. Rigo raised a lid with one hand, intending to swing the plastic trash bag up and in with the other. He stopped in mid-swing as something inside caught his eye—something in the enclosed depths that wasn't black like the bags.

The bloated bag pendulumed back and hit him in the leg. He dropped it on the ground, heart racing, gulping air permeated with the stench of three-day-old garbage. He cautiously peered over the metal rim, hoping, almost praying, that what he'd seen wasn't what he thought it was.

He jumped back, involuntarily, vomit rising in his throat, and the lid came crashing down. The noise startled him into full alertness. The patrons sitting outside on the patio would hear. This was no time for weakness. He swallowed hard and lifted the lid again, carefully, until it stayed open by itself. The Dumpster now took on the appearance of a coffin. Gripping the rim hard with both hands, he forced himself to look inside again.

The human arm he had seen led to a shoulder, topped by a head with short, dark hair. The body had sunk into the spaces between the bags, but Rigo could see part of a back and a leg. He forced himself to lean into the coffin and saw the curve of a breast on the other side of the arm. It was a girl—or a woman. She wasn't wearing any clothes.

He thought he saw her ribs move. Getting up all his nerve, he touched her arm. It was cool but warmer than the air; she was alive! His heart leaped. He had to act fast. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his cell phone. It was turned off—"Cell phones must be turned off during working hours." His hands were shaking so much he had trouble pressing the button to activate it.

It took valuable seconds to start up, but the alternative, racing into the restaurant and yelling that he needed to use a phone, would take longer and cause a panic. He didn't want to leave the woman. He knew he could get service in this out-of-the-way place; he had made calls from his cell phone previously at the restaurant. When he finally saw the bars he pressed 911 with fumbling fingers.

"Nine one one. What's your emergency?"

He cleared his throat. “There’s an unconscious woman in a Dumpster at Carlson’s Restaurant.”

The operator asked for his location. Of course—he was on a cell phone. “I’m at Golden Cove on Palos Verdes Drive West and Hawthorne Boulevard in Rancho Palos Verdes.”

Even secluded as they were, in the southwest corner of the Palos Verdes Peninsula, he knew there was a fire station just five minutes from here. The operator assured him help was on the way. She stayed on the line with him, asking him questions.

He leaned way over the woman to try to see her face. It had caked blood and ugly red marks on it. He momentarily placed the phone on the trash bag he had brought out and moved her head slightly to make sure her nose and mouth weren’t being smothered by plastic. Since she was breathing, the operator told him not to try to lift her out of the Dumpster. That could make any injuries she had worse.

At her suggestion, he took off his apron and laid it on top of the woman to help warm her up. Although the day promised to be summery, it was still cool in the shade. Rigo was getting used to touching her now. He gently felt for a pulse in her neck. It was slow and faint, but it was definitely there.

Approaching sirens told him help was on the way. He felt relief and hope. Relief that someone else would take over the responsibility for her and hope she would be all right.

Rigo backed up three steps from his position at the net and watched the lob arc downward toward him. Too short. His savage overhead smash sent the ball into the far corner of the court where it hit just inside the baseline and then careened away from Adam Loken who stood like a statue, watching it.

“You’re too good for me today.”

Adam strolled to the net, assuming a nonchalance Rigo knew was out of character for the very competitive friend he had known since elementary school. They clasped hands briefly in the twenty-first century version of a handshake and walked to the bench at the side of the court where they sucked water from plastic bottles and wiped the sweat from their faces with towels.

Adam focused his blue eyes on Rigo. “All right, I’ve tried to be patient. You were barely talking when we started. Now tell me about the girl you found in the Dumpster this morning.”

Rigo was talked out about the girl in the Dumpster. First the rescue truck had arrived, with its siren wailing, and several paramedics had raced around to the back of the restaurant, carrying a bag full of their instruments and a cart for transporting her. All he had to do with them was direct them to the Dumpster.

They went to work, quickly and efficiently, determined she apparently didn’t have any injuries that would be exacerbated by moving her, and then gently lifted her and placed her on the cart. They covered her with a sheet, wheeled her rapidly past the astonished outdoor diners, and slid her into the waiting ambulance. Before the door closed, Rigo, who had followed the action around the building, saw the attendant give her what looked like oxygen.

By this time, a sheriff’s car had arrived. The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department provided police protection for the city of Rancho Palos Verdes. The deputy asked Rigo questions and took notes. More police types came and put tape around the trash area. They took the bags out of the Dumpsters and searched through the garbage. Rigo answered questions and wondered who was going to clean up the mess they were making.

Last came the media, consisting of a couple of television trucks with satellite dishes on top and several reporters, including one for the local *Palos Verdes Peninsula News*. All of them

asked Rigo questions. He would be on the five o'clock news and in the newspapers. The restaurant manager excused him from working his shift but that probably meant he wouldn't be paid.

By the time everybody was through with Rigo, he was physically and mentally exhausted. He considered cancelling his tennis date with Adam but decided that kind of activity was what he needed to clear his head. He took his emotions out on the court, and poor Adam suffered the consequences.

Now Rigo briefly summarized what had happened for Adam's benefit, repeating the words that had become a memorized speech. He saw shock and awe on Adam's face—Adam, who was usually imperturbable.

Adam waited until Rigo finished before he spoke. "Damn. No wonder you slaughtered me. I know this sounds like an inane question, but—is she a babe?"

"She might have been before some asshole made a punching bag out of her face."

"Will they catch who did it?"

Rigo shrugged. "I gather they didn't find any clues. No weapon, no clothes, no ID. They tried to get fingerprints off the Dumpster, but I think that's a long shot..."

"Maybe when she comes to she can tell who did that to her."

"*If* she comes to. She looked pretty bad."

