

Day of
Reckoning

Valerie Massey Goree

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Dedication

Gwendolyn Massey, my dear mother, my greatest fan.

Also Available

Weep in the Night

The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming. Psalm 37:12-13

1

Two hours crouched behind a reeking dumpster on a dead-end San Diego street must be the worst possible way to spend a balmy Saturday night. Private Investigator, Lela Ortiz, stretched and massaged her taut neck muscles.

Heavy-metal music pumped out of the open living room windows of the suspect's house. When would the rowdy party end?

The raid they'd been working on for more than a week had to go down tonight, or the life of a nineteen-year-old girl with a severe medical condition could be lost forever. If they didn't rescue her now, she would surely end up bruised and broken. Perhaps dead. The tight burn scars on Lela's torso pinched as if they had a mind of their own. At a minimum, dead inside. Like Lela.

She stood and slowed her breathing, a martial arts technique she'd perfected in recent years. Patience was not one of her virtues, but the exercise lowered her stress level.

According to the last check of her watch, another

half-hour crept by before the partygoers stumbled down the front steps of the aged house scheduled for demolition in the morning. In the darkness, Lela pressed her back against the warped clapboard siding of the residence. Peeling paint flaked off in her hand.

She counted the people as they staggered down the street or crawled into vehicles. Four. Five. Six.

Where was the last one? From the shadows, she peeked around the corner and almost collided with number seven. Flattening herself against the wall, she reached for her holster.

Drunk, or high, the burly man squinted at her. The streetlight strobed across his whiskered face. His brow wrinkled, and he stepped closer, sucking in a deep draw from his cigarette.

A gust of wind swirled smoke in Lela's face. The pungent odor roiled her insides, raking up bitter memories. No! She refused to visit the past.

"Why you hiding here?" A puff of alcohol-laced air sprayed out with his slurred words.

Lela held her breath.

His presence at that precise moment could jeopardize the mission. She could silence him, but that would draw attention. Ignore him and—

"Hey. I'm talking to you." The man flipped his cigarette butt into the dumpster.

"I...I'm waiting for Doug. He said he'd meet me here after the party." Good enough to explain her lurking presence.

"Sly ol' Dougie Polk." A gruff laugh rumbled up from his beer belly. "Little blonde Chrissy inside and a cutie pie brunette out here. Good for him." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Want me to keep you company while you wait?"

The music ceased abruptly.

Lela pointed toward the house. "I'm pretty sure Dougie wouldn't like that. He'll be coming out any minute."

"Yeah. Too bad." He turned away and waved over his shoulder. "Holler at me if you change your mind." He stumbled down the street, laughter floating like a boozy cloud behind him.

She tapped her earpiece. "Hank, seven people left the house. That's how many guests were inside, correct?"

From his station at the rear of the house, her teammate responded. "Yeah. But..."

Something in his faltering voice prickled her scalp. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Are you sure we don't need backup?"

"Not if your recon was accurate. I'm relying on you." Lela eyed a small dog across the street. *Shoo, mutt. Please don't bark.* He sniffed the air before resuming his trek.

She blew out a sigh. "What's your situation?"

Her partner's voice crackled in her ear. "All's quiet. Back door is still open. Doug and Chrissy are in the side bedroom. Are we going in?"

"Yes. Follow the plan. You enter the back while I take the front. We'll meet in the bedroom. Remember, we want the girl unharmed." Sliding her pistol out of its holster, she climbed the lopsided front steps. "On my count." She drew in a breath. "One." Exhaled. "Two." Steadied her hand. "Three." Another deep breath. "Go!" She turned the knob, nudged the door open. Gun raised, she scanned the hall.

A three-legged wooden chair was propped against the wall on uneven floorboards. In the living room a

torn couch. Beer cans were strewn on the table. The kitchen held an overflowing trashcan. Dirty dishes were piled in the sink, spilling out onto the counter.

Agent Hank came into view as he crept along the other end of the hall. With a bob of his head, he indicated a door to his left.

Lela edged closer.

The low tones of the occupants' conversation drifted out of the partially opened doorway. She strained to understand their words. Was either voice Chrissy's? Clutching her weapon, Lela pointed it upward. They must succeed. No way would she let this alleged drug dealer leave with a sick young woman tonight, or stay with him and get hurt. Lela had worked for the International Retrieval Organization for five years and knew too much about what could happen when a vulnerable girl allowed a man like Doug into her life. Lela signaled Hank with a nod.

He opened the door, and she rushed in but halted immediately.

Chrissy was in a headlock with Doug holding a gun to her temple.

Drat. Lela and Hank had somehow advertised their presence.

"Stay back," Doug said, maneuvering his pallid captive toward the window.

"There's no way out." Lela aimed at his head. "Let her go."

He used Chrissy as a shield, holding her tight. She whimpered and clawed at Doug's muscled forearm.

"I'm not leaving here without her." Lela inched closer.

The unmade bed in one corner and the threadbare

carpet faded into the background.

“She belongs to me.”

Lela narrowed her eyes. “Oh, no, she doesn’t.”

Short and stocky, this weasel stood mere inches taller than Chrissy.

His gaze shifted from Lela to Hank, and he broke into a sudden smirk. “You two better drop your weapons. My friend is behind you.”

Typical ploy. Pretend to have a companion. “Not gonna happen.”

But a deep voice intruded. “Do as Doug says.”

Lela froze. So much for Hank’s recon. Why’d she trust him? She willed her partner to use his training.

A grunt and thump.

The smile slithered off Doug’s face.

She tilted her head and fixed her gaze on him.

The unmistakable sounds of the fracas moved to the hall. Hank had engaged the surprise guest.

Her best option? A round house kick? One more step, and she’d be within reach. She swung her leg and connected with Doug’s elbow. The weapon discharged before he let go, the bullet whizzing over Chrissy’s head. His grip slackened, and the girl dropped to the bed.

The sound of Chrissy’s head thudding against the rough metal frame was followed by her shriek and a half dozen cuss words.

Doug staggered backward, off kilter. Lela kicked again, catching him in the chin this time. For a moment, he lay motionless. With a quick swipe of her foot, she booted his weapon away then secured his wrists with plasticuffs. Heaving a sigh, she turned to Chrissy, ready to offer comfort.

The wailing girl held a piece of clothing to her

bleeding head.

A hand vise-gripped Lela's arm. "Drop your weapon." The same deep voice.

She hesitated.

"Do it." The muzzle of a gun prodded her back.

Lowering her arm in a pretense of releasing her pistol, she twisted around, but the guy countered with a punch to her face. Lela reeled backward, stumbling over the rumpled rug.

The pudgy man smirked, fists ready to pummel her again.

Bad move on his part. With a low growl, she lunged forward, landing a solid kick to his groin.

He doubled over.

Lela tightened her hand into a knife edge, and slammed it against the vagus nerve in his neck, rendering him disoriented long enough for her to secure his wrists.

A shadow crossed the doorway.

She raised her pistol.

Hank lurched in. "Sorry. He got away. You OK?"

"Yeah." She holstered her weapon. "Call 911. Then meet me in the kitchen."

Lela slid her arm around Chrissy. "You're safe now. No one's gonna hurt you. Come with me. Let's check your injury." She escorted the trembling young woman to the kitchen and gently set her in a chair. "I see a small scrape." Lela packed a wad of paper towels over the wound. "It'll bleed a bunch, but it's not serious."

Tall and wiry, Hank folded himself into another chair. "Ambulance and cops are on their way."

"Good." Lela pressed her lips together. With the threat neutralized, and Chrissy safe, she should be able

to relax, but Hank's mistake brought back too many memories. She buried her latent fear and struggled to keep her tone even. "You were responsible for the recon. I relied on your intel." Chest rising and falling, she wiped sweat from her upper lip. Ouch. Her jaw would be swollen in no time.

Chrissy sucked in a deep, ragged breath, scowling at her rescuers. "Did my parents send you? Are they in San Diego?"

"Yes." Lela swallowed. "Your folks are frantic. You need to take your meds."

"How do they know I'm not?"

Puffing out his chest, Hank said, "IRO has resources—"

Lela thumped his shoulder. At that moment, she wished she could do way more. "Your prescription hasn't been filled for several months. You might not feel bad now, but your condition will get worse."

"I don't care."

"But your parents do."

Chrissy tugged at the neck of her stained T-shirt. "Dougie said all I need is his special blend of...of pills. I've been taking them, and I'm fine. Most of the time. Right now, I'm tired."

Lela gathered another wad of paper towels. "Hold this against your wound." Surprised the girl obeyed, Lela sat next to her. She covered Chrissy's other hand with hers. Cold. A possible symptom of not taking her thyroid meds. "Didn't the doctor explain the seriousness of your condition?"

Chrissy shrugged. "I told you. I don't care. I want to have fun like all my friends." She rested her elbow on the nicked wooden table. "You don't look like cops."

Before Hank could reveal more than necessary, Lela said, "We're IRO agents. International Retrieval Organization."

Chrissy's eyebrows arched. "Wow. Daddy must have shelled out the big bucks." Her voice caught, and her shoulders sagged. She sniffed. Tears filled her eyes and soon streamed down her cheeks.

"Your parents will meet us at the hospital." Lela's phone vibrated in her shirt pocket. She yanked it out and checked the screen. "Hank, it's the boss. Take care of Chrissy while I talk to Bowen. You can do that much, right?"

He sat straighter and nodded.

"Hey, Bowen. Mission accomplished." Lela strode to the far end of the hall, her heart rate increasing with each step as she rehearsed the list of complaints regarding Hank's performance.

"Another check in the *done* column. How's the girl?"

"A scrape, but she'll be fine when she's back on her medication. At least that's what her parents said." Lela bit her lip. *Don't lose your cool.* "I, on the other hand, am not OK."

"What's wrong? Did Hank—?"

"Why are you asking?" She rolled her eyes. "Did you expect him to mess up?" She gave Bowen no time to answer. "Well, he did. Reported seven visitors, but there were eight. Could have cost us lives." Hand on her hip, she kicked at the baseboard. "Why'd you saddle me with a rookie?"

"Slow down, agent, and watch your tone."

"Bowen, I've never known you to send in someone who wasn't ready."

"You could have called for backup. Why do you

always try to do everything on your own?"

Not again. "I know my capabilities. I expect other agents to give one hundred percent, as I do. Hank let me down. If that's his best, then it's not good enough."

"Take a breather, Lela. You're one of my top agents. You have a perfect record. But you were hurt tonight."

She nibbled her thumbnail. "Did Hank tell you?"

"Yes."

"He's the reason I got punched."

"Ortiz, you must rely on others. I don't expect you to do it all yourself."

"But—"

"I know you're upset. You've been working for two weeks straight. I don't want to see you in the office until Tuesday. Enjoy your break." Bowen ended the call.

She hung her head. His reprimand stung. Was he right? Deep within her soul, she knew he was. People always let her down. How could she relinquish control when she only felt safe when she held the reins?

Wailing sirens closed in. Tires screeched. Red and blue lights flashed through the living room windows.

As Lela hurried to open the front door to the authorities, she removed the band from her disheveled ponytail and shook her hair loose.

Was there anyone she could trust?

2

Seagulls squawked overhead as Jay Vashon tossed the small foam football to his four-year-old nephew.

Gangly Sean stretched out his arms, but the ball dropped at his feet. He snatched it from the sand and clutched it to his chest. "Mine, Jay-Jay."

"You have to share with your sisters." Jay accompanied his words with hand signs. Diagnosed with fragile X syndrome, Sean required constant supervision and aids such as signs and pictures to help process language.

Jay signed for Sean to throw the ball, but the tyke scrunched his face and shook his head.

Scooping up the boy, Jay swung him around. "It's Erin's turn. Please give me the ball, Sean."

"No. Mine. Mine." He arched his back and squirmed, but Jay held tight. "Mine." An ear-piecing screech followed.

A quick end to a fun family game.

Bang!

Jay dropped to his knees and cradled Sean in his arms. *Keep him safe. Keep him safe.*

The child hollered and writhed, dropping the football.

Hugging him close, Jay scanned his surroundings. Two little girls stared at him. Blonde curls. Bathing

suits. His nieces, Erin and Alyssa. Then he spied the brown ball. Sean's plaything, not the soccer ball he'd given to young Tariq in Kabul. He sucked in a breath. A crashing wave, not Afghanistan.

As Sean calmed down, Jay released him and stood. Now, where was Danielle? He swiped sweat off his brow and scanned the beach. In a couple of seconds, he spotted his nine-year-old niece halfway up the steep dune that led to the access road. Jay grabbed Sean's hand and motioned Erin and Alyssa to follow as he traversed the beach. "Danielle, where are you going?"

"Since you won't let us swim, I'm going home." Danielle kept climbing.

"No, you're not. Come back here."

She pivoted, lost her balance, and plopped onto the soft sand. With strands of blonde hair half concealing her pretty face, she eyed him and pouted. Folding her arms across her chest, she thrust her chin forward.

Still reeling from the sudden rare flashback, Jay grinned at her attempt to hide her embarrassment. "You can't go by yourself."

"Why not, Uncle Jay? Don't treat me like a baby. I can walk home by myself."

"Even so, we're staying together until your folks get back." No way would another kid die on his watch.

Danielle huffed. "You're always so vigilant."

He reached the spot where she'd dropped and patted her head. "Vigilant. That's a big word."

"Well, I'm a big girl."

"I know, sweetheart, and I'm sorry my vigilance bothers you. But I need to...keep everyone safe."

Sean tugged Jay's hand. "Go, Jay-Jay."

"You're right, little man. Let's head home for a

snack." Jay helped Danielle to her feet. "Please hold your sisters' hands."

"OK. Sorry I was...petulant."

Another adult word. She must be using the word a day calendar he had given her for her birthday. He favored her apology with a smile, picked up Sean, and swung him to a shoulder perch. The kid loved to ride up there where he could run his fingers through Jay's military-short hair. To the girls he said, "You can ask your dad to bring you back to the beach later this afternoon. I'll race you to the villa."

Alyssa, a year older than Sean, but the same height, scurried to keep up with her dainty little steps. "We're going to win, Uncle Jay."

His phone beeped in his shirt pocket. He checked the screen. The name of the caller stopped him in his tracks. *Kate*. He hadn't heard from her since she broke off their engagement almost a year ago. What did she want? No time to find out.

Sean squealed and dug his heels into Jay's ribs.

The girls crossed the road.

Danielle punched in the code when she reached the gate before him.

"We won. We won." Alyssa danced down the driveway.

"Well done, girls."

While the gate closed, his phone rang again. He set Sean down and swiped the screen this time. "Hello, Kate."

"I'm on my way to San Diego. Can I see you when I arrive?"

No "How are you? It's been a while." Did she expect him to be available whenever she asked?

"I'm in Ensenada with the family." No explanation

needed. Kate had accompanied him twice to Chuck and Beth's beach villa on the western coast of Mexico's Baja Peninsula.

"Oh, um..." Her voice trembled. Was she crying?

"Kate, are you all right?"

"No. I really need to see you. I don't want to discuss anything over the phone. Can you meet me—"

"Of course." Why did he agree? Wasn't he over her yet? "I'll leave as soon as I can. My sister sprained her wrist at church yesterday. It's still swollen so Chuck took her to the clinic. They should be back any minute. Since we only have one vehicle here, I can't leave until they return." He ushered the kids into the marble-tiled foyer where Marta, the housekeeper, stood with hands on her hips.

"I've been waiting, *niños*. My special *buñuelos* are ready. Go wash your hands." The slim, raven-haired woman *tsked-tsked*, following the kids down the hall. Delicious aromas of cinnamon and anise accompanied her.

"Hold on a sec, Kate." Jay waited until the children entered the bathroom, and then said, "Do you have your passport? We can meet in Rosarito."

"I...where is it?"

"About fifteen miles south of Tijuana. Remember the restaurant on the beach where we celebrated your promotion?"

"Yeah." Kate sniffed. "OK. Thanks, Jay."

"I'll text you when I leave." But she'd already ended the call.

Whooping and skipping with an uneven gait, Sean stormed into the kitchen.

Jay settled him at the table. When the girls were seated, Jay poured the *piloncillo* syrup over the flat,

golden-brown treats on their plates. Absentmindedly chewing the crispy snack, Jay barely noticed the orange-flavored sticky goodness or heard the chatter around the table.

Kate. After all this time, her voice still caused his heart to lurch. Why? He didn't regret the broken engagement. It hadn't taken him long to appreciate they were both better off apart. Especially when he recalled her exact words. "My priorities have changed a lot since we first met. If we go our separate ways, we can both achieve our goals: a churchy life and a house full of kids for you, and a fantastic career for me."

He drained his glass of iced tea. He could call her back and cancel their meeting. But she'd sounded distressed. Besides, she must desperately need to see him to endure the one-hundred-fifty-mile trip from Los Angeles.

3

Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough. Lela slouched on the sofa and tossed her half-read mystery novel onto the coffee table. Monday afternoon hours stretched ahead like taffy on a hot summer day. She'd visited her parents. Spent the morning with nieces and nephews. Stocked her pantry and freezer. Now what?

Through reflection combined with soul-searching, she'd overcome her chagrin, and, she had to admit, her anger at being benched. She'd even acknowledged her prickly nature could be her worst enemy, but at least she knew her capabilities. And anyone she worked with would have to earn her trust. Enough introspection. She itched to be back at work with her IRO colleagues.

Energy level at maximum, she changed into shorts, T-shirt, and sneakers, and expended her built-up frustrations sparring with her favorite sixty-pound punching bag in the apartment complex's gym. An hour later, panting and sore, she returned home to soak in a tub of jasmine-scented water. Lulled by the soothing heat, she dozed.

Her cell phone buzzed.

She jerked upright, flinging water across the bathroom.

The steady noise persisted.