Retribution

Regina Smeltzer

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Dedication

To my husband, Paul. The best parts of me are because of you.

Also Available from Regina Smeltzer

Deadly Decision

1

"You got any matches on you?" The boy, not more than sixteen, snickered over his words. He had a crowd of followers: boys dressed in jeans with waists cinched around their thighs and girls wearing shirts that looked as if they had shrunk in the dryer. The teens rallied around the outspoken leader like groupies to a rock-star.

Lillian did her best to ignore the barb even though the pain of his words took her breath away. She had been taking a chance going to town alone, but she only needed to make a couple of stops. Her mother's worried face flashed in front of her. Only one hour out of the house on her own. She used to be a trial attorney, free to do her own thing. But that freedom had disappeared two years ago, along with the rest of her life.

Across the street, Cynthia, who had served as her maid of honor five years ago, walked arm-in-arm with her new husband. Feeling a sudden rush of bravery, Lillian crossed the street. "Cynthia, it's nice to see you. I heard you got married…"

The woman clutched her leather purse to her chest as her face paled beneath layers of well-applied makeup. "Lillian, it's been a long time." The sleeve of the man's black cashmere coat bunched beneath her grip. "Sorry we can't stop and chat, but we're already late…" Cynthia glanced around, apparently trying to

decide where she was supposed to be. The couple walked on; their pace doubled. As she reached the corner, Cynthia turned her apprehensive face toward Lillian.

Wishing she had not tried to resurrect a friendship, to break the ice on a pond that should never have frozen, she stiffened her back and entered the pharmacy. Vitamins for her eyes. That's what the optometrist had recommended.

A middle-aged woman rounded the stack of first aid supplies. "Can I help—" She stopped and stared, her eyes narrowing. "What do you want?"

Not rude exactly, but far from jovial. Hadn't she represented this woman's family member once? A cousin or something? The vitamins were quickly rung up, bagged, and thrust toward her. No "good bye." No "what else can I do for you?" Just steel-cold eyes that chilled her blood.

Anger built as she headed back to her car. After the fire, no one had listened to her side of the story, preferring instead to fabricate their own. Clenching her jaw until it ached she pointed the car toward her parents' home—her home for the past two years.

The ad for a job in South Carolina had come as a surprise. Even more surprising was her acceptance if she wanted it. She tromped on the gas, decision made. She would escape Cleveland and create a new life for herself.

~*~

Heavy velvet curtains covered the den windows and hid Cleveland's October chill. The air, scrubbed clean twice every hour, thanks to the ventilation

system that guaranteed removal of ninety-nine percent of the disease-causing viruses, smelled like fake pine. Thick beige carpet muffled Lillian's footsteps as she entered the room.

Engrossed in their routine after-dinner activities, both her mother and father were oblivious to her presence. The tranquil family scene tugged at her heart, but she was about to destroy it as she wrapped icy hands around her arms. "I have accepted the position at Francis Marion University. I leave tomorrow."

The silence pounded against her ears even as the tension in the room blistered her face. She swallowed against the thickness in her throat. What could she say that would sway her parents from the verdict they had already chosen?

Ralph Goodson neatly folded the newspaper, pursing his lips to form a hard line across his face. A line-backer in college, Ralph Goodson had maintained his athletic physique through long hours of personal training. Graying only around the temples, he still turned the ladies' eyes.

Even though they had been over this before, she knew he would bring it up again, perhaps hoping she would change the story about how a faculty position became available in the middle of a semester, and why she needed to leave home.

Attorney Goodson stared at Lillian with his intimidating trial-glare for several seconds before rising from the leather recliner. Perhaps out of habit, perhaps buying time to compose his deposition, he hesitated long enough to pick a speck of invisible lint from his jacket before walking to the fire place.

As she waited, her heart pounded against her ribs

more violently than at any trial she had led. Hours spent researching her adversary had allowed her to arrive in court, prepared to battle wits with the opponent, and she had been successful.

But this man used to bounce her on his knee, share pretend tea parties, and even play dress-up on occasion. Together they had buried Goldie the goldfish. As his reputation as a top-rate trial attorney grew, Ralph Goodson's time at home had diminished. Now she hardly knew the man who leaned against the white brick with one arm draped across the polished walnut mantle.

"We knew you were considering the job," her father said, running a long finger across the wood. His stare threatened to burn a hole through her retina. "Considering is fine. Consider all you want, but accepting is another matter altogether. You should have consulted me."

Anger shot from her heart. "This is one of the reasons I need to leave! You control everything I do."

"Sweetheart—"

"No, don't start, Mom. You know I'm right. I can't leave the house without your approval. When I'm on the phone you hover just around the corner. You tell me when to go to bed and when to take a shower, as though I no longer have a mind of my own." She sounded more like an adolescent than a grown woman, and she hated the reversion.

Her father thrummed his fingers against the wood. "Have you discussed this with Dr. Widder?"

"Yes."

"And?"

Lillian matched her father's gaze; she had learned from the best. "He thinks it's too soon to go off on my

own."

"You should listen to him. He *is* your psychiatrist."

Lillian's back stiffened as she tried to control the emotion that welled up. In the past two years, her feelings had coiled together in her gut like a nest of snakes, impossible to separate anger from fear or hate.

"Why won't you listen to the advice of your doctor?" Her father's dark eyes narrowed. "All of a sudden you think you know everything?"

"I've asked advice from the wisest of all. I've been talking to God about this move ever since the announcement came in the mail." She sighed, knowing her parents held little regard for the power of prayer.

Mr. Goodson rolled his eyes. "You know what I think about that. Why even bring it up? I regret the day you ever met that man—"

"That man has a name. It's Craig, and he was my husband." She spit the words toward him. "And yes, he shared Jesus. It was the best thing that ever happened to me." She took a deep breath and allowed the pressure to escape through her nose. "If you only understood the peace that God can bring–"

"Peace! I didn't see peace on your face a couple of years ago when we had to practically carry you home. Where was Jesus then? And for that matter, where has he been for the past two years?"

Mrs. Goodson shifted in her chair. Her artfully applied cheek color now appeared clown-like against her pallor. "What do you hope to do in South Carolina that you can't do here?" She placed her cup in its saucer. The cheerful ting of china against china sounded incongruent next to the pounding tension. "I just don't understand why you need to move so far

away."

"I can't live the rest of my life inside this house." Lillian looked at her mother.

Designer clothes and sculpted hair battled against Lillian's soft curls and sweat shirt. Two years ago, her parents' home had felt like a womb, protecting and safe. Now the walls loomed over her like a prison, both of her parents acting as wardens.

The furnace turned on and its low rumble broke the hard silence. The curtains puffed away from the window as air blew from the vent. The artificial scent caused her stomach to churn.

"If you insist on going," her father said, "I'll go with you. Help you get settled."

"I should go, I'm her mother."

She sighed. "Neither of you are going. I am capable of doing this myself. I'm not a baby anymore. I'm adult, an attorney."

"You *were* an attorney," her mother mumbled, "and we still don't know who set the fire that—"

Lillian's mouth tightened. "According to most of Cleveland, I set that fire." It always came back to the fire.

Her mother studied her hands. "No one believes that, dear."

Unfortunately, many did. Lillian had no alibi for the time in question.

She squeezed her eyes against the scenes that rolled across her memory. Her heart thundered against her ribs, trying valiantly to seek escape from its confinement. She pushed both fists into her chest, wishing she could force her fingers through tissue and muscle and create an escape for her dead heart.

The movie was playing; she had to narrate for her

parents or be alone in the horror. "It was Sunday afternoon," her voice shook. "Craig begged me to stay home, but I wanted to go to the office and clear away the papers from the trial. I promised to be back in time to put Susan to bed." Tears streamed down her face. "She was only two. Two years old. She needed her mommy to be home, and I left her." The pounding heart became quivering gelatin. It swelled and filled her throat, choking her words. "The next time I saw her…"

"Lillian, stop!"

She turned to her father. "If you think you can fix this, you can't. My husband is dead, and my daughter is dead, and it's my fault."

"Lillian—"

Wild with grief, she faced her father. "You know it's true. The two of you have done everything in your power to keep your feelings from becoming public. It isn't good for your social status or your profession to have a daughter who was suspected—"

"Lillian, stop this nonsense!"

"Too many conversations have ended when I came into the room. You always ask me about my mood." She turned to her mother. "If no one believes I set the fire, then why did you stop going to the bridge club on Thursdays?"

Martha Goodson looked toward the curtains that now lay flat against the windows, centurions against the dark. "You know I don't like to leave you alone."

"You quit because you didn't like defending me every week against your so-called friends."

Her father's steel-gray eyes locked with hers. "It didn't help when you refused to tell the police where you were."

"So I was labeled a person-of-interest." Regret burned like acid. "I need you to believe me; I did not set that fire."

"Lillian, it will blow over given time. Think about what you are doing."

"I am thinking about it."

"You don't know anyone down south," her mother interjected. "What is this Francis Marion University? You've been educated to be more than a teacher. You won't fit in…"

Her father tapped his fingers on the mantle. "And you don't always choose the best friends."

"You mean Craig. Go ahead and say it!"

"You could have had any man you wanted." Her mom reshaped the nap of the carpet with her foot.

"I got the man I wanted, and now he's gone. And my job is gone. My friends avoid me; my family…" Tears flowed down her cheeks. Hands fisted at her sides.

"Honey, this is where you belong," her mother murmured. "You need our supervision for awhile yet. Let Dr. Widder spend more time with you."

She looked from one distressed face to the other. "I don't need professional counseling; I need a life." She stumbled from the room.

~*~

As he walked, his breath came in tight gasps, not from exertion but fear. Why did he continue to allow the memory to control his steps? No one forced this torture on him; no one even knew of his weekly tour into the nether regions of evil. But until retribution had been served, the compulsion to relive what amounted

to the end of his life continued, as though it were a movie that automatically rewound at will. He walked through the familiar neighborhood, crossing one quiet street, then the next, not stopping to look both ways, not caring. As his destination neared, the taste of bile filled his mouth.

Evening dusk dropped its blanket of gray. Shadows elongated into reaching arms, and the dark edges of buildings shielded their menace. He jumped when a low branch brushed his face. The empty lot was still four houses away when the nightmare started.

The roar of the fire blanketed the sound of sirens. He ran closer and boiling waves of heat and smoke rolled over him, burning his lungs, stealing his air. With his heart racing, he searched his yard, then the yards of neighboring houses. Where was she? No! She couldn't be inside! Blackness enveloped his mind. As always, he found himself standing in the empty weed-infested lot. As the evening air chilled his skin, he shoved fists into his eyes, hoping to block what came next.

The spasms of reality hit, folding him over against the pain. He tightened his jaw, determined not to give in to the hopelessness that bent him like iron in the fire. The moment passed and the present returned. It always did.

He had watched the city crew a month later, after all the legal issues of her death had been properly handled, as they shoveled the charred remains of his home into trucks and hauled his memories to the dump. Now he clung to his anger because it was all he had. Anger at a world that had given him nothing.

The last vestige of gray transitioned into the blackness of night. Moonlight cast a ghostly sheen over

the vacant lot. Leaves shivered above him. Light spilled from windows of the adjacent houses. Sounds: voices, television, the clank of dishes. The essence of normal life seeped from the dwellings and taunted him like the beckoning finger of a vixen woman. Even the weeds came alive as they shifted in the breeze, the mocking silver ghosts of hopes stolen.

So many nightmares. But the end neared. Vengeance would soon be accomplished and then, at last, his life could be reborn. An eye for an eye. A life for a life.

Roger Jenkins headed back to his empty house, confident in the knowledge that Lillian Hunter would soon be on her way. Her death would be his balm.

2

Tremulous breaths hung frozen around Lillian's head as she placed her suitcase in the trunk of the car. She turned on the headlights and swords of light penetrated the darkness that lay thick right before dawn. Driving around the circular drive, she allowed herself one last look at the well-manicured lawn and two-story brick house. Tears skated down icy cheeks as she moved toward the unknown.

Two faces peered out of an upstairs window. A silent hand lifted to the retreating taillights. She sighed, knowing she wasn't meant to witness the farewell; her father had told her they would not see her off.

The past had not been all bad, had it? Recent years colored the good, shading the weeks and months more darkly than perhaps memory alone would have done. In their own way, her parents did love her. But since she had become a Christian, a gap had grown. She and Craig had prayed for them so many times during their five years of marriage. Now her prayers were uttered alone. Was it possible to love someone and not like them at the same time? She swallowed against the fullness that threatened to block her throat.

Accelerating onto the highway, the dream of a new life loomed large. She had left her parents' home before, and memories wafted into her consciousness: her own two-story wood-framed house, a husband

who adored her, their child. For a second she felt a glimmer of hope, but then with determination she tightened her jaw and shoved her foot harder on the gas pedal. Loneliness would be her retribution. Alone for the remainder of her life, the spinster lady living at the end of the street, the one all the neighborhood kids said hid a dark secret. Only for her, it would be true.

Why did one fail to appreciate what they had until it was gone? She would give anything for the chance to spend one more restless night beside her snoring husband, to feel his steady hands on her body, to have his kisses tell her all was good. Or to wrap her arms around her fussing toddler, feel her baby-softness and smell the scent of her newly bathed skin. To walk hand-in-hand with her at the mall, her sweet curls bobbling as she did her best to act grown-up. And the delightful messes at the table. Tears misted her eyes.

"God, I am so sorry. I am so sorry!" The words reverberated from windshield to roof to floor but the heaviness in her heart remained. Had her sorrow penetrated no further than the fabric and metal above her head? *God, did you hear me?*

She ached for the comfort and wisdom of Craig. He always knew what to say, how to handle every situation. More than that, he knew God. He would know if this move south was the right thing, or if she was going off on an old-fashioned snipe hunt. But Craig lay beside their daughter in the Greenlawn Cemetery, their charred bodies long cold, their souls soaring with the God she fervently sought, but whose Presence remained elusive.

Something about the offer in South Carolina had nagged at her from the start, but she had brushed the feeling away in her eagerness to see the job as an

answer to her prayer. The fact that Francis Marion University had not yet posted the position made her squirm, but hey, God could do anything, couldn't He?

She exhaled deeply, trying to rid herself of the doubt. This had to be God's plan. If not, she was headed toward chaos. Craig always told her to trust, but she didn't know if this move was jumping or trusting.

Outside the left-hand window, a line of red seeped across the horizon: the birth of a new day.

But to Lillian it looked as if God Himself had lighted the world on fire.

~*~

A clicking sound aroused Roger from his fitful sleep, and he lay in bed, mentally alert but immobile. He scanned the dark room, but nothing moved. When the air conditioning unit clicked off he relaxed, realizing what had awakened him. He rolled over, looked at the clock and a smile creased his face. Five in the morning.

Most likely Lillian had started her journey or was saying a last good-bye. She had no idea how final those moments would be.

Too wired to go back to sleep, he headed to the kitchen. Coffee, that's what he needed. The gurgling of water in the coffeemaker blended with the metallic tick of the clock hanging on the opposite wall. Each tick marked one second. How many seconds must be endured before his adversary arrived?

Wandering the house, room by room, he thought of Ted and Trina. Lucky for him, they owned a bed and breakfast where Lillian could stay. He smirked in

satisfaction.

Ted and Trina were nice people, and the next week would bring nothing but trouble for them. An unexpected surge of guilt grabbed his stomach and shoved it into his lungs. *It's not like I had a choice.* He slammed his cup onto the counter, brown liquid flying over his hand, speckling the beige laminate. *The McIverson Bed and Breakfast was the only place available. I had to send her there.*

Internal rationalization waged war with the white flag of truth. When he had shown up at church with the goal of meeting the couple, Trina had immediately invited him to the house for lunch. And now he was using them. But he had used people before. If Ted and Trina knew the story behind the woman soon to become their guest, they would welcome the chance to help him to correct a wrong.

He opened the living room blinds. A line of red seeped into the horizon: the birth of a new day. But to him it looked as if God Himself had lighted the world on fire.

~*~

As Lillian drove, the flames on the horizon faded to orange and yellow, giving birth to daylight and renewal. The sky continued to lighten, and the few clouds that dotted the endless blue looked like cotton candy, spun and light. Clear weather had been promised. How ironic. Sunshine on the day she entered the hurricane of change.

But Jesus rebuked the waves. Why did scripture keep coming to mind? Jesus might have rebuked the storm for the disciples, but she still grasped any piece of

reality that would keep her afloat. Was she clinging to nothing more stable than a wish?

Mindless miles of highway rolled beneath her. Strangers in cars and semis, all moving toward destinations of their own. Her future lay at the end of one of the roads. God had to be the instigator. He promised good would come from bad, if she would just trust Him. OK, she trusted and the job ad had arrived. She wanted to do some good with what was left of her shambled life. Last night she had felt so confident, but now, in the isolation of her car, doubt crept in.

She remembered her first day at Ohio State University. Her parents had carried her suitcases, her computer, boxes of necessities she never used. They even helped make her bed. And then there was nothing more that needed to be done. As her mom and dad had walked across the parking lot, her fingernails dug into the plastic chair in front of the window, tears running down her face. The *new* had looked like a scary monster under the bed, but it had worked out. It would work out again.

Now, breathing out the tension, she eased her death-grip on the steering wheel. College had been one of the best times of her life. This change could be too.

The vibration of tires on pavement lulled her into a state of automation. She shifted from lane to lane as needed, exited when appropriate, slowed and accelerated, all without conscious thought. Traffic-weary air filtered through the freshener clipped to the vent, leaving behind the scent of vanilla. Which caused cancer sooner, air pollution or air jells that masked the toxins? What did it matter, anyway?

Ohio passed in a blur. At the Ohio River, she

breathed deeply in and out, visualizing herself exhaling her fears, allowing her internal darkness to swirl from her nose like sulfur from a caldron. She cracked the car window to allow the imagined foul stench to escape, and along with it the vanilla sent from the deodorizer that most likely had planted seeds of cancer in her lungs. She smiled at her own fantasy. Her face felt strange. When had she smiled last? She couldn't remember, but it felt good and she chuckled, hoping her demon had really been sucked out the window.

West Virginia arrived, draped in yellow and red splashes of autumn color: God's latest fashions modeled by the trees. Gas for the car and a quick lunch. Sitting alone at a picnic table beside the combination gas station/markette, spearing day-old lettuce, she closed her eyes. The air remained cool but the sun warmed her face. She lowered her shoulders and sat quietly, content to just be. Sounds penetrated but didn't disturb. Voices, indistinct, but there. Birds. And somewhere close by, running water.

Mixed with the scent of gasoline were hints of pine, real this time, and the smell of dried leaves. She smiled, remembering the maple leaves she and her sister used to rake only to jump into the pile, sending their hard work flying across the grass. The tree had been removed, deemed too messy. She missed the tree.

Another hunk of lettuce found its way into her mouth. A leaf drifted into her lap, and she worked to smooth its curling edges, feeling the veins that had provided life until the leaf had separated from the body.

That was how she felt: severed from her life, cut from her family, now drifting alone. A tear formed in

the corner of her eye. *Stop it!* She might be alone, but life bubbled within her. Even though the mantle of guilt had become a constant second skin, she *would* survive.

~*~

Roger knew he should have gone to church this one last time. Especially today. But the goal for his religious affiliation had already been met, and he wasn't accustomed to actions without a purpose. He and God stood on opposite sides of glory. There was no illusion on his part for which side he would end up on.

A hot shower should ease some of the tightness in his back and neck. He closed the bedroom door and engaged the deadbolt. In the bathroom, the click of a second lock assured his privacy. Even though steam coated the glass shower doors, the deadbolts allowed him to enjoy the shower without worry over unexpected guests. He should know. The pounding water had masked his approach on at least two occasions. It wouldn't happen to him.

When the shower turned cold, he buffed himself dry, wrapped a towel around his waist, and trimmed his short beard. He unbolted the bathroom door, muscles tense until he examined the bedroom door. Finding it closed and locked, he entered the room and dressed for the day. Strapping his watch onto his wrist, he glanced at the time and frowned. Tapping on the crystal, noting the second hand moved as usual, he still matched the time to his bedside clock. The shower should have taken more than 20 minutes. It was going to be a long day.