

# Chapter 1

Jack Travis had a round frame and a face grizzled with dark whiskers, his horrible breath a result of his diet, consisting mostly of foods overloaded with onion and garlic. He wore his gray suit jacket unbuttoned, but his belt buckle was obscured by the hang-over of his gut, covered by an off-white shirt. Open collar with no tie in sight. Travis didn't have much use for dressing himself in fine clothes. To him, a cheap suit was just as good as an expensive one, better because of the price tag. This preference wasn't due to a lack of funds on his part—Jack Travis had quite a bit of money. But he preferred to spend it on things he felt were more worth his time.

He walked in on short legs, barely putting his height above five-foot-five. The two men who flanked him dressed far nicer than he did and they towered over him. He gestured for them to stop and they waited for him by the entrance while Travis walked down the narrow hallway and entered one of the many doors that lined the corridor.

The door led to a small booth with a reclining chair in the center, a box of tissues on the small ledge, and a glass window covered from the other side. Travis took out some bills from his wallet and slid them into the slot. The

gold ring on his finger, with the Chinese character for fire engraved in the red gemstone, caught his eye and he chuckled. He sank into the chair, shifting to accommodate his frame. He raised his gut enough to unbuckle his belt and open his pants, reaching inside his shorts.

The covering over the window opened and Travis expected to see Charlotte, his usual girl. This was just a warm-up for his usual visits with Charlotte—he liked the teasing and after the show was over, she would go home with him.

But Charlotte with her dark hair and green eyes wasn't there. Instead a different woman sat in her place, very attractive, possibly late twenties or early thirties. Her long blond hair hung down, framing her thin face and she stared at Travis with an icy gaze. She wore a white shirt under a black leather jacket and a pair of blue denim jeans. Her hands were clasped behind her back.

“Tell me how you want it,” she said with a slight grin.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asked.

“A friend of Dante.” Her left hand swung around, a Desert Eagle clasped in her gloved grip. Two quick squeezes of the trigger were followed by two holes in the glass, now stained red. Jack Travis lay motionless in the recliner, blood seeping from the holes in his body—one in his forehead, the other in his neck.

The mysterious woman stood from the stool, walking past the unconscious Charlotte. The chloroform would keep her out for a while and solved the problem of any witnesses. Angela Lockhart would have preferred to poison Travis, make it look like an accident. But Dante wanted to

send a message—snitches never prosper.

Before she had the opportunity to leave the booth, the door on the other end opened and Travis' two bodyguards entered, presumably drawn by the sound of the gunfire.

“Soundproof, my ass...” muttered Angela.

The guards each drew their weapons and opened fire. Angela dropped to the ground as the bullets cut through the space she once occupied. She wished she had a second gun. Her hand reached beneath her jacket, finding one of the spare clips she kept in the special pockets sewn into the lining. She gripped the spare clip in her right hand, hefting the Eagle in her left and getting ready, keeping careful count of the shots she heard. They stopped at eleven. Seven shots unaccounted for. So either they didn't have full clips or they got smart and were now approaching the window. Angela wished it were the former but knew the latter was always far more likely. If she didn't take a chance now, it would be harder to get out.

She sprung from her crouch. The shots shattered the glass, leaving an open gap between the booths. Angela leapt headfirst through it, over the chair that housed Travis's body and between the guards who stood on either side. She landed in a roll and came upright in the corridor, swinging the gun from side to side, squeezing off four more shots through the doorway. One missed completely, one struck the guard on her left in his knee, the other two hit the right guard in his torso, felling him. She stood, ready to finish off the one left behind, but a new sound jerked her head to the right.

“You bitch!”

At the end of the corridor stood the owner, a shotgun in his hands, rage in his eyes. She rolled her own eyes and jumped into the booth just as the owner fired a load of buckshot, landing at the wall almost diagonal from the surviving guard.

“Just when you think a job is finished, you have to contend with some fat bastard holding a shotgun.”

The remaining guard sat on the ground, claspings his knee to stop the bleeding, moaning in pain. Once he saw Angela, he risked moving one of his blood-stained hands, trying to grab his gun. Angela acted on instinct, firing one shot into his hand and then quieting his screams of pain by putting a bullet in his head.

She repeated her employer’s instructions in a whisper, “we have to send a message.” Two rounds left in the Eagle, so she ejected the clip and slapped in the fresh one, loading the first bullet into the chamber. “Fuck you, Dante.”

Edging carefully to the door, she took one of the spare guns and tossed it into the hall. The owner fired again, startled by the sudden movement.

“Amateurs,” said Angela. The distraction meant recoil time, a window of no more than a moment. But it was a window she decided to dive through. The booth across the corridor was open. She leaped across the hallway, firing two shots as she fell into the opposite booth. The owner followed up with some more shots.

Pushed up against the wall, she was just inches from the door. She could hear his footsteps and his heavy breathing. By this point, all the gunfire would attract attention. She hoped the other patrons were either too busy with

their pipe cleaning or too scared by the gunfire to leave the booths and investigate. After she put down this asshole with the shotgun, she could get out of here, confident in the knowledge that no one who saw her face survived.

Her gun vanished inside her jacket. It wouldn't do her much good, not for what she planned. She waited and as soon as she saw the tip of the shotgun poke into the room, she grabbed it. Wrenching it from the surprised man's grip, she slammed the butt against his nose, hard enough to hear a crack and blood started to flow from his nostrils. She swung it like a bat, striking the side of his head and he rocked to the side. Flipping the gun around, Angela pointed it at his chest and fired. The force of impact sent him flying back, landing in the doorway of the booth where her other victims lay.

After dropping the shotgun, she went to Travis' body. She raised his hand, examining the ring on it and carefully removed it. Knowing what Travis' purpose in this place was, she was glad she had gloves. They'd end up in the fire later tonight. But the ring was important. Dante specified that he wanted it back.

She left calmly through the back entrance, the door used by the dancers. In the alley, a customized Harley Davidson sat waiting, helmet resting on top. Zipping up her jacket and donning the helmet, she started the bike and rode out slowly from the alley, merging into traffic and driving off.