

ROGUE PHARMA

A Qian Choi Novel

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CHAPTER 1

Muggers

“Hand me the gun, Fred.”

Wordlessly he picked it up from where it had fallen from the dead man’s hand and passed it to her. She took it in her left hand, still holding her .22 in her right, menacing the man on the ground in front of her. She glanced at it. *Some cheapo knockoff from somewhere*, she thought. *Just what you would expect from a couple of stupid, useless muggers and would-be rapists.*

“Roll over, shithead,” she commanded. The man did. She leaned over and shot him between the eyes with his friend’s gun. He twitched and was still. All was quiet. There was no one in the alley at the back of the houses, and she could see no one on the street.

She hurriedly wiped off her .22 and placed it in the dead man’s hand, folding it around the butt. She also wiped the other gun and placed it back in the hand of the man she had first shot, squeezing his hand around the butt.

“Okay Fred. Let’s go!”

He raised his eyebrows. “And leave them here, Lauren? Call the police later?”

“If no one sees us, let’s not call them at all. The police are clueless. They will simply give us a hard time.”

He grunted in amusement and shrugged his shoulders. Exiting the alleyway onto the street, they glanced around. In the far distance, they saw a couple coming towards them, so they turned and walked back the way they had come toward Yonge Street. At the next side street, they separated.

Lauren turned and walked north for a couple of blocks, and then walked west to go home. At her suggestion, her husband walked south and then west so that anyone who met them on the street saw individuals, not a couple. In that very quiet residential neighborhood, there were few people about at that time of night, and they saw no one either of them recognized.

While walking calmly home, Lauren went over the encounter in her mind to see if there was any other way she could have handled it.

She had been exercising on the elliptical trainer in the basement gym in her house when her husband, Fred Buechel, had phoned her. The phone was resting on the machine, as she had been listening to a podcast while she worked out. Recognizing the number, she picked up, slightly breathless, while she continued to run. "Yes?"

"Fred here. I am in the office. Just having a productive meeting with a new company that Leda has introduced to me."

Lauren knew Leda. She was an engineer that her orthopedic surgeon husband occasionally still worked with in the implant design business, which for years had fascinated him.

"The guys are going to be in Toronto for one night only, so Leda has suggested we carry on the meeting and conclude with dinner at Coppi's, you know, that Northern Italian restaurant on Yonge Street. Would you like to come along?"

Lauren remembered that place. It was the scene of her first date with Buechel shortly after her husband, Al Campbell, had unexpectedly dropped dead of a heart attack. Both Lauren and her husband were widely traveled, so for them eating out was not exactly a big deal. Lauren now had two little children at home, Sheila from her first husband, Al, and Scott from Fred, her current husband. Going out for the evening was not a problem, as they had a live-in amah, but it was not something that they did very often. As she had no special plans for that night, she thought, *Why not?*

"Sure, Fred. About what time?"

He consulted the others in his office. "About half past six. That suits you?"

"No problem. I will take a taxi across."

She had done that and had had an enjoyable evening. The group her husband was meeting turned out to be doctors and businessmen from India who had bought a small American orthopedic implant company and were looking for help with publicity and sales. Leda, Buechel's old friend, had suggested he might be interested. Buechel was interested, not so much in

helping with sales in the US, where he was involved with other companies, but in India, which he saw as a burgeoning market. He also felt that priced right, it might be possible to break into extremely price-sensitive markets like Canada and the UK. These markets were controlled by governments, and the price of any new procedure, rather than the outcome, was a major issue.

The food, as always in that restaurant, was excellent. Lauren, having eaten there before, knew what she liked, carpaccio, followed by a mushroom risotto done in a Parmesan cheese wheel. She also liked the fish baked in salt Ligurian style. The meal was accompanied by several bottles of excellent Montepulciano d’Abruzzo.

They had decided on a contract in principle, but the new owners would have to finish their exploratory business trip and return to India before finalizing it. Buechel, having been to India many times and having loved it, was happy at the thought of again visiting that country. The men from India called for a taxi to take them back downtown where they were staying. Leda planned on taking the subway home, and Buechel and Lauren decided to walk, as it was a fine fall night and their house was only a mile or two away in a quiet enclave west of Yonge Street.

Arm in arm, they strolled up a quiet residential street, which at that time of night was deserted. They were a couple of blocks away from Yonge Street when two young men came out of one of the numerous laneways. Robberies and violence were sadly becoming more common year after year in Toronto as the number of new migrants, posing as juvenile refugees, increased. These people, almost all young men, with no education and no skills, would never find employment in what was becoming an increasingly AI-dominated job market. Minimum wage demands mandated by government policy meant that increasingly low-grade service jobs, such as cashiers, were being computerized and therefore disappearing.

These migrants unfortunately therefore would mostly simply become an underclass, forever dependent on government handouts. Most people knew that, but they were still being brought in by a cynical federal government who assumed such migrants would always vote for them if they promised more and more welfare.

Buechel was wary but not particularly alarmed at their sudden appearance, as they were unshaven, sloppily dressed young men but not particularly menacing. He was shocked when one of them pulled out a pistol and pointed it at his face.

“Be quiet, and step into this alley,” the gunman hissed.

Buechel, who had wrestled competitively in his youth, was unsure if this was real or a toy gun and made to move toward him. Lauren recognized it as real and held his arm.

“Do as they say, Fred,” she said.

They took a few steps into the tree-lined alley at the back of the houses. The two men grinned. They obviously felt they had these soft, weak city people under control. One looked closely at Lauren. She recognized that look. She had the round neotenous Asian face that many men liked. In spite of having two children, the rigorous exercise program she undertook had kept her slim and fit. At her lover’s request years ago, she had had a little breast enhancement—just enough to be pleasing without attracting too much male attention.

Anticipating a pleasant evening with good company in a superb restaurant, she was made up and had dressed nicely in a relatively short skirt to show her legs. She thought she knew exactly what the muggers were thinking, a little pleasant rape while her impotent husband looked on.

“Pull your skirt up,” said the unarmed man. Grinning, the gunman kept his gun pointed at Buechel’s face.

Lauren smiled at them. The dopamine blast had hit her, and everything slowed down as the visual frames per second went sky-high from the standard fifty. The light in the shady alleyway brightened. Unobtrusively she moved her hand-bag in front of herself with her right hand. With the left, she grasped the free edge of her skirt and pulled it high up to expose her panties. Her handbag was small, so the skirt covered it. While the men stared at her uncovered thighs and groin, she unsnapped the clip on her handbag with her right hand. It opened, and she felt the gun she usually carried.

She got her hand around the butt and pulled it out, dropping her skirt. She shot the gunman in the belly as her hand cleared the handbag. His face was blank, and his mouth dropped open. Lauren had a fleeting thought, *‘This clown has never fired a gun in his life.’*

Then as her hand came up smoothly to eye level, she shot him in the face. It was only a .22, but the soft slug still penetrated his facial bones and entered his skull, bouncing around inside his brain. He stood for a second then collapsed in a heap, dropping his gun. Arm fully extended, Lauren held the gun to the other man’s face.

“On your knees, shit-head,” she snarled, “or I’ll kill you too.”

Stunned at the sudden change of power dynamic and what seemed to be the death of his companion, the man dropped to his knees, looking up at the muzzle of the gun pointing at him.

“Now lie face down.”

The man, thoroughly frightened by the sudden death of his friend, did so.

“Pick up that gun, Fred, and give it to me,” said Lauren. When he did, she ordered the man on the ground to roll over then, with no hesitation, shot him between the eyes with that gun.

They stayed on separate side streets until they reached their home, Buechel arriving first and Lauren a few minutes later.

“Did you see anyone you knew?” asked Lauren.

“No,” said Buechel. “So I guess we don’t need to call the police.”

“If there was a CCTV camera I didn’t see, then possibly they may come looking. But you have Gary, that lawyer friend of yours, and he can talk to them. We just say nothing. The police are nowadays nothing but a nuisance, bothering law-abiding citizens and helping criminals.”

“I know,” sighed Buechel. “To think that thirty years ago I was the police orthopedic surgeon and I respected these guys. I used to go drinking and shooting with them. When did it all change?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. Would you like a drink, Fred?”

“I would. Let me make you one, Lauren. A vodka tonic?”

“Yes, a stiff one. Hard to believe that Toronto the Good is getting almost as bad as Paris.”

Coming back from the kitchen, Buechel handed her a drink. “Not quite as bad. When we were assaulted there, you killed half a dozen of them, tonight just a couple. Wait till I tell Phillippe what has happened again. He will say, ‘Ah, *mon ami*, what an exciting life you live. Have Lauren come back to Paris and kill a few more bad guys.’”

Lauren laughed, thinking back to what had happened when she and Fred had been attacked in that city. Fred still did not realize how lucky they had been that she had managed to kill all the attackers. He had become almost nonchalant about her lethal abilities. He did not know, or pretended he did not know, that she had been a professional assassin, so for her, death was not a stranger. She had been introduced into that trade years ago by her lover. She found it quite amusing that Buechel and his best friend, Phillippe Cartier in Paris, were so unconcerned about the dead bodies she left lying

around. After that first violent encounter in Paris, she had asked Buechel how he felt about her killing their attackers.

“Nothing much. No guilt, no Raskolnikov effect. Just relief that somehow we got out of that alive. I am an orthopedic surgeon, so I am not in the death business. But I saw lots of people die during my training. I guess all docs do. So we are a bit like Edith Cavell, the UK nurse who was executed by a German firing squad for helping prisoners of war escape in WWI. Looking down the barrels of the guns, she said, ‘I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me.’ Besides, if people want to act like animals, killing them is like stepping on a cockroach. And Phillippe feels exactly the same.”

“I am glad you feel that way, Fred. So many people are bleeding hearts. If I had not killed tonight’s clowns, they would have been out of jail in no time if they ever even were charged with a crime. The police would likely have charged me with excessive use of force leading to manslaughter. Even if the police didn’t, the thug left alive would have claimed lifelong disability and sued me for inducing a post-traumatic stress disorder.”

“I like the way you left your gun with him to give the police a plausible excuse that they shot each other. We will have to make a trip across the border into the US so you can buy a replacement for the wall safe here.”

“We will eventually,” said Lauren. “But I have a spare one in the basement. Just hang on till I fetch it.”

She went to her additional gun safe in the basement and took a .22 from that and placed it in the wall safe beside the door. Buechel had been astonished when he first found out about it. The safe was small, hidden behind a painting, which swung out on a steel plate. The only contents were a couple of guns—a standard 9 mm Walther and a short barrel .22, which Lauren usually took with her when she left the house. She had had that installed because she was concerned that the woman who had employed her on a major execution would send someone after her to eliminate her to break the information chain.

Later that night, both feeling relief about another escape from what could have been a desperate situation, Lauren and Buechel celebrated with a prolonged lovemaking before dropping off into a dreamless sleep.

The two dead bodies were discovered the next morning. There were no witnesses—or none came forward—and no cameras. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, as Lauren hoped, the incident was passed off by the police as a homicidal struggle, and no further investigations were undertaken.