

RETRIBUTION

(Excerpt)

“As the coach rolled down the highway into town, it seemed as if the years rolled back and my memories were set before me. It was my first return since I’d left for Paris. Little had changed. The diner where I had sat with Matthew, the Co-op where I’d bought the feed, most of the other shops, were all still there, just as I remembered them. It was a Currier and Ives kind of place, but tinged with sadness and regret. I had no idea if Mrs. Wright would even be at home, but I had to try.

I stopped at a local florist and bought the nicest bouquet I could afford. It consisted of flowers in pastel shades, pink and white carnations, deeper pink gerbera daisies and blue campanula. Then I walked twenty minutes to the apartment building Winslow had told me was now Mrs. Wright’s address.

I pressed the doorbell and held my breath.

The woman I had seen at the police station opened the door. She stood staring at me for about fifteen seconds. I told her who I was and held out the flowers for her to take. She accepted them and asked me to enter her home. I felt intimidated and out of place, as in a dream when the land is strange and the people foreign.

Mrs. Wright asked me to sit in the living room of the small apartment. There were photographs of Sophie and Sophie’s father everywhere. I was, for a time, unable to speak. I just tried to absorb some of her pain.

At last I thought it was time I fulfilled the purpose for which I’d come back into her life.

“Mrs. Wright –“ I started.

“Kelli, it’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. I’ve lived for years with the guilt of not protecting your little girl. But I’ve never told you how sorry I am for what happened. I need you to know that I wish more than anything that I could change what happened to Sophie. Please forgive me.”

“Kelli,” she said, “for a long time I was very angry with everyone, with the whole world. What right did other mothers have to keep their children safe with them when I didn’t? Why did this happen to me? Wasn’t losing my husband enough? For some unknown reason I had to lose the one little bright spot left in my life that gave me a reason to go on living.”

Each of us wiped the tears that streamed down our faces.

“After a while I began to realize that life isn’t fair,” she said. “Some people have more burdens than others it seems, but everyone has something that at first seems impossible to believe, to accept.”

She got up to put the flowers in water. She was a small person, compact, efficient looking. I followed her into the kitchen, which wasn’t much bigger than my little quarters in the basement suite. It suited her small frame much better than my large one. I sat at her kitchen table as she arranged the gerberas and the campanula in the center of the vase, with the carnations all around the outside.

“What you learn,” she said, “is that the pain doesn’t go away. After a while you allow yourself to stop hurting for a little while. And you feel guilty. But you have to live, too.

Because Sophie died, it doesn’t mean that I should die. It means that I should honor her life and remember the sweet child she was. And you must do the same.”

She put the flowers on the table and sat down, placing her hand over mine.

“I understand your guilt, Kelli. If you had been there, maybe it wouldn’t have happened. I feel just as guilty. If I had kept her home, it would not have happened. But it did happen.

What we need to do now is remember the love we each had for her and the love she gave to us.”

I wondered where this woman had found such courage in the face of so much loss. I felt honored to be with her.

“Please stay in touch with me, Mrs. Wright. I think the police are on the brink of something and it will at least give us some answers.”

“I will do that, Kelli. Thank you.”

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