

On the Banks of Lethe

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It's hard to argue with the reflection on a razorblade at six in the morning.

I might as well tell you what happened.

2004

ONE

October in Dallas is a funny time of year. Unlike the careful seasons of California, as if someone is slowly twisting a dial from summer to autumn, north Texas gets a hodgepodge of bizarre extremes from one day to the next. A day in the high eighties can immediately be followed by a low of thirty or forty, and then back again two or three times in one week. I believe God had some serious mental issues he took out on The Lone Star State when he made it.

Denny called at six o'clock in the morning on Saturday. That horrible son of a bitch.

"Hello," I grunted in the dark, remembering only after a second what I was doing there.

"Rise and shine, maggot!" He'd chosen his best drill sergeant voice, a parody of a war movie character. "Time's a wastin'! First call! FIRST CALL! Get in that fucking shower and use some goddamned soap, cuz you smell like the crack of MY ASS!"

"I'm awake," I lied with half my face buried in a pillow and glanced at the clock. "Jesus, Den. The sun isn't even up yet."

"Hell, bwah," he drawled, switching voices. Now I was listening to a very believable, but also ridiculous southern redneck. "Them cows need milkin', and what's more: you done gotta come take me ta breakfast if'n you really want he'p clearin' out that storage unit."

"Right." I ran fingers through my hair, stared into the blackness above me and winced. "I don't suppose we could get the food *after* we clear the unit, eh?"

"Not a goddamned chance!" He'd finally settled on his normal voice, which had a flat, non-surfer California inflection. "Best way to start the day, we gotta go get some grits and sausage and coffee and roll up our sleeves and woo hoo!"

“See you in an hour, asshole.” The pain in my head was light, nothing compared to some of my larger hangovers, but a definite reminder of too much fun. First call, Den had said? Hell, I’d seen *last* call the night before, down at my favorite English-style pub.

I staggered to the bathroom with a bladder that felt like a straining puffer fish, clicking the doorway switch as I went. The overhead lights blasted the near-empty room. Anyone who looked in would have been surprised – the only furniture left in the entire apartment was a queen-sized mattress set put up on wooden blocks, a small particleboard nightstand, and a CD player plugged in next to the bed.

My reflection glared back at me. Black hair an inch too long stuck out in jags and spikes, and I urinated while contemplating the hint of a double chin that had recently begun. Although the rest of my body was trim, my neck seemed to be getting fat. Turning thirty hadn’t been as bad as I’d expected, but I still didn’t like it.

After I’d turned the shower on, I walked back into my bedroom to grab one of the few towels that hadn’t been packed yet. My eyes stopped and lingered over the Vulture for a while, as they did four or five times a day. I stared at his rotten-egg pupils and wondered how he’d gotten so angry.

“Moving day,” I muttered, and ran my fingers along his dry, stiff pinions. His beak was curled into a demonic sneer, as if he couldn’t spit out a foul enough curse at me. I winked at his terrible face and went back to the shower.

“You better not take me to some crappy little diner, either.”

“I won’t.” It was the second time I’d said it since Denny had gotten into the car. “Just trust me, it’s a good place.”

“Do they serve waffles? I could go for some waffles.” He was my height, but a great deal thinner and in better shape. Then again, I had more hair – he’d begun balding when he was twenty-two, and the recession of his hairline had been relentless. In his jeans and a t-shirt that had seen better days, nobody would have

ever guessed that my pal was a Gulf War Veteran. Most wouldn't even have suspected that he was a computer genius. Sometimes I doubted that he was anything but a hick from Podunk, Nebraska, but he always put me in my place with a quip too intellectual for a redneck. We'd been friends for the last ten years, ever since I'd first set foot on Texan soil.

"They have waffles."

"Good. Step on it, pilgrim. I'm hungry."

"Well," I sneered while reaching for the cigarette he proffered, "If you didn't live in Butt-Fucking Egypt, we'd be there already." He rolled down the window after we lit up, letting in surprisingly warm, humid air for so late in the year.

"There's nothing wrong with Lewisville." It was a statement, not a protest.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"How about you begin by buttoning your yap and getting me some damned waffles like you promised me?"

I laughed out loud.

"I never promised waffles!"

"The *devil* you say, Charles!"

"I told you that if you helped me clear out my storage unit, I'd buy you breakfast."

"And it were a moity koindniss yer graced us wif, guvnah!" It was a horrible cockney accent. "The benev'lint rich an' fay-muss ah-tist took pity on a poor workin' peasant!"

"Stop that."

He elbowed me in the ribs and cracked up as we flew down I-35, making small jokes and steering away from the worst topic of conversation until we'd arrived at the restaurant. And checked out the menu. And ordered a couple stacks of waffles and bacon. And talked about pretty much everything else.

"So," he said while dredging a pool of syrup with a sausage patty, "You heard anything about those two?"

His words had an instant effect on my appetite. I dropped my eyes, shoved the plate away from me half eaten, and pulled the coffee closer.

"Not a peep," I replied, perhaps a touch too briskly.

“Sorry,” he muttered around a mouthful of dead pig. “Just wondered if anyone knew anything yet.”

Under normal circumstances I would have waited for him to finish eating before lighting up. I took a deep hit and blew it at the ceiling fan, but Den didn’t seem to notice.

“It’s been a month.”

“They’re careful. I’ve called all her friends, all of his, and nobody’s heard a thing that they’re willing to admit to.” I tapped ash and glared out the window. “The detective I hired hasn’t found much, but he has a few suspicions.”

“Like what?”

“Did you ever meet either of them before I introduced you?”

Denny shook his head.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. I don’t travel in those kinds of social circles. First time was at that party you held, the one with the ice duck.”

“Swan.”

“Looked like a duck to me. How much did that thing run you, Mister Artist?”

“Too much,” I mumbled. “Anyway, I knew them for about two months before it all went down. It seemed like a lot longer than that, but when I thought about it...”

“I know what you mean,” Denny nodded, polishing off the last of his breakfast. “You like someone, you hang out with them, it feels like you’ve known them forever.”

“The detective went to all of their friends that I told him about, and he found the damndest thing. Nobody else had known them prior to this summer.”

A car pulled up to the stop sign at the corner, and I watched two college girls giggle inside as I spoke.

“Nobody. It’s like they just landed in Dallas and started making new friends.”

“I thought the guy, what was his name?”

“Douglas.”

“I thought he transferred here from some law firm in New York.”

“The detective checked that out, too. It was bullshit. The firm Doug kept talking about has never heard of him.” Denny gave me a look and I nodded. “Yeah. And that hair salon she constantly talked about?” I pulled out my wallet and extracted a green cardboard rectangle. It was a nice card, with an art-deco print on the front and fine lettering in the middle: *PATRICIA COHEN – Owner – 13617 Inwood Rd. #16 Dallas Texas – (972) 555-0975*

Denny held the card up, eyebrows raised as he read it.

“Let me guess,” he grunted, handing it back.

“Yeah. It doesn’t exist.” I tucked my wallet away and butted my cigarette. “My guy’s been able to confirm that pretty much everything they ever said was a lie, and he’s almost dead positive that their names were fake, too.”

“Jesus.” Den drained his coffee and motioned to the waitress for a refill. “So who *are* they?”

“Nobody knows. The detective thinks they might have originally moved here from Oklahoma, so he’s up there poking around.”

“What did they really do for a living?”

I asked the waitress for the check as she cleared our dishes, only continuing after she left.

“That’s what I hope to find out today. Maybe the stuff they put in my storage unit was nothing of value, or maybe it’ll tell me a few things about where and *who* they are.”

Relative silence around us made the deadbolt sound like a pistol being cocked. Returning the key to my pocket, I rumbled the doors upward.

“How long you had this thing?”

“About five years,” I said, squinting at the dark interior. The space was ten feet by eight, half of it crammed with uniform and dusty brown boxes. To one side lay a stack of white cubes, smaller than the others and held shut by large amounts of strapping tape. I pointed to them and grinned. “That’s the stuff.”

“Cool.” Denny stepped forward with his pocketknife out.

I was considering taking the boxes home for inspection, but as he slit the first one open I decided against it. It contained a

jumble of pictures and negatives, about four pounds worth. Denny rifled through it, sitting cross legged on the concrete floor and making stacks in front of us.

The prints ranged in age from 1998 onward. Most of them starred a tall, clean-cut blonde man with a mustache, an auburn-haired woman with a classic beauty to her features, or both. They looked happy in the photos, posing for the camera in various climates. Here they laughed under a thatched roof, colorful drinks in their hands. Hawaii maybe. And in this one she played tennis, her white skirt showing off a cheesecake-delicious length of slender leg. Denny whistled and flipped one of the pictures to me: it was a shot of Trish in a skimpy bikini, hamming it up on some anonymous beach.

“Can’t say I blame you,” he chuckled, returning to the stacks he was making of the photos.

“Shut up. How are you sorting these, anyway?”

“Pictures of them in tropical settings,” he said, pointing to each one as he spoke, “Pictures of ski vacations, unknown places over here, and miscellaneous prints here.”

“Miscellaneous?”

He handed me the thinnest stack. I checked through all six of them slowly. A blurry snapshot of a red car at a stoplight. An inexplicable shot of an empty birdcage in front of a window. Three pictures of a calico cat playing with a toy mouse. The last print showed a woman’s sneaker next to a swimming pool. I handed them back, and we plowed through the pile without finding anything worthwhile.

The second box held nothing but shredded newspaper and an old, cheap flower vase.

“Think it’s worth anything?” Denny asked, hefting it.

“No. You can get these at Kroger for five bucks.”

The third one was wider and squatter. After cutting the lid open and removing a manila envelope, Denny smiled like a kid opening a birthday present.

“Bingo,” he said, handing me a sheaf of documents. I grabbed them eagerly.

“Phone bills. I’ll be damned.”

“Who’s this David Stanford character? Name ring a bell?”

“Nope. Address says he’s in – or was, anyway – Connecticut. I’ve never even been there.”

“How much you want to bet that’s another name for Doug Cohen?”

“Could very well be,” I smiled, and motioned at the rest of the boxes. “Let’s see what else I can turn over to the good detective.”

“Why didn’t he go through those boxes in the first place?”

We’d finished cataloguing the contents of Doug and Patricia’s crates, and were about to load them into the trunk of my car. It had only taken us an hour to find out the rest of the boxes had held some old clothing, a stack of outdated OMNI magazines with a return address in Albany, New York, and a great many menus from all over the United States. I’d decided to turn all of it over to Detective Heese.

“Because I never told him about them. I’d completely forgotten about letting them use my unit until I started getting ready to move. Some of this stuff is crap I haven’t even looked at since I put it in.”

“Well, better late than never, as the old saying goes,” Denny grunted, and wandered over to pick up one of the cardboard containers. I turned to pop the trunk. “Ow!”

“What?” I turned to find Denny rubbing his head, picking up a book I didn’t recognize at first.

“I bumped into your boxes, and this damned thing came down on my head.” He glanced at the front and handed it to me. It was a thin hardcover book, with tooled leather at the corners and a heavily laminated front. I smiled and brushed away the dust.

BIG BEAR HIGH SCHOOL
CLASS OF 1993

“Wow,” I breathed, flipping through the pages. “I haven’t seen this thing in years.”

“How about we pack up this stuff, and you gather the wool another time?”

“Okay.” I tossed the yearbook into the backseat before helping Denny out. We loaded up, and I drove him home before heading down to see the people I’d hired.

TWO

After dropping Denny off, I went to the detective agency. Rick Heese worked out of a tiny office on Hillcrest road, in a building that had been new before Kennedy's assassination. Stacy, his secretary and wife, confirmed that he wouldn't be back from Oklahoma for at least a day or so, but promised to get the boxes to him. She was a rock-hard chick in her late thirties, not exactly attractive but good looking in a very rugged way, like a post-modern sculpture hewn from granite. She carefully stacked the boxes in a closet and locked it.

"Rick wanted me to tell you that he found something up there," she said as she sat back down at her computer. The phone buzzed, and she grabbed the receiver as quickly as a striking snake. "Heese investigations, please hold." A stab of the finger and she replaced the phone in the cradle with another whipcrack movement. "I'm not supposed to say too much, but he thinks your thieves may have pulled the same kind of stunt in Tulsa."

"Did he say what time tomorrow he'd be back?"

"Sometime around noon, unless something comes up." She read something off her computer monitor and grinned. "Huh. Another client referral."

"Thanks," I smiled to her and exited as she went back to the phones.

I was ten feet from my car when my pocket buzzed. The cell phone's display showed a number in the 909 area code that I didn't recognize. I punched the ignore button and stuffed it back into my jeans. Let them go to voicemail. My private number was handed out sparingly to the few that I trusted, and I rarely answered unless the caller ID showed a familiar name.

Detective Heese had urged me to continue this policy. I'd given Doug and Trish my cell number, and if they wanted to talk to me I should let them do it over recorded messages. If nothing else, we could use them in court if it came to that.

Stuck in traffic halfway home, I listened to the message.

“If this is the right...” A woman paused, her voice shaking. “If this is the phone number for Charlie, please call me. My number is 909-555-2516.” Another pause for two seconds, and she said something else.

Of course, that was the moment the jackass in an SUV to my left decided to lean on his horn. I punched the number 3 to save the message, hung up the phone and glared. He was your average self-entitled professional that clogged highway 75 in the mid afternoon: White dress shirt, maroon tie, expensive sunglasses and thinning hair that he would no doubt someday fix via medical treatments. His oversized compensation for penis issues dwarfed my two-door coupe.

I rolled my windows up and moseyed over to the nearest exit at 5 miles per hour. The exit ramp was as clogged as the rest of the freeway. Everyone was trying to get home as fast as possible, so naturally they all packed together and made an unmoving river of commuters. I decided to take Northwest Highway and some other back roads to my house in Bedford, a suburb between Dallas and Ft. Worth.

An hour later, after grabbing a burger at a drive through near my home, I dialed my voicemail again.

“If this is the right... If this is the phone number for Charlie, please call me...”

She sounded like she'd been crying. I hit the number 4 on the keypad, starting the message over from the beginning.

“If this is the right...” In the pause, she sounded like she was swallowing a word. “If this is the phone number for Charlie, please call me. My number is 909-555-2516.” She sighed in the background, barely audible over the hiss of the cell phone. “It's Becks. *Please.*”

The last word of her message was heavy with emotion, as if she were pleading for her life. I punched the 3 again and thought hard as I parked in front of my house. The name was unfamiliar. What's more, nobody except my sister had called me Charlie in almost a decade. One of her friends?

I scanned the street on my way to the front door. Everything seemed fine, but Rick had warned me that Doug and Trish might come back and try to rob me again. Once inside, I made a beeline for the burglar alarm. It was an expensive system, very hard to bypass or fool, with motion sensors in every room and magnetic sensors bolted to all the windows and doors. My fingers tapped out the six digits, and the control panel blinked green. Had I taken ten seconds too long, three armed guards were less than a mile away and the police would have been automatically contacted. My hackles didn't completely unwind until I'd checked all three bedrooms and taken a good look around the backyard. Once my solitude was verified, I grabbed a beer out of the fridge, sat down in my office and checked the messages on my landline.

The first was from my agent, dated the night before.

"Hey, I know you're officially on vacation for the next three days, but give me a call. I think we're onboard with the newest series from your favorite author. Call me Monday or something."

Making a note to do so, I listened to three quick hang-ups in a row. Any other time I would have dismissed them outright, especially since a swarm of telemarketers had taken to haunting my home phone, but after everything that had happened, I was loathe to dismiss details. I scrolled back through the caller ID on the wireless handset. All three had been in the middle of the morning, coming from PRIVATE. I jotted down the times on the whiteboard in very small letters, just in case, but they were probably just more telemarketers.

The final message made me drop my pen.

"Hi. Is this Charlie?" A pause of five or six seconds, so long that I was surprised my voicemail didn't disconnect the call. "I don't know if you can hear me. Call me. 909-555-2516. It's Becks. I'll try your cell, too."

I stopped the voicemail and saved all messages without thinking. After navigating through them one at a time and deleting the hang-ups, I replayed the mystery woman's voice.

"Hi. Is this Charlie?" That question ended in a lilt, as if my name had inspired hope in her. Whoever she was, my earlier suspicions grew stronger. This gal had been crying pretty hard,

according to the nasal tone of her voice. In the space that followed, I heard something else, like she was swallowing hiccups. “I don’t know if you can hear me. Call me. 909-555-2516.” I pressed the button to replay the message from the beginning, and in the silence I distinctly heard a faint sound like a car horn. “It’s Becks.” A barely noticeable pause. “I’ll try your cell too.” The click ending the call was about two seconds later, as if she’d taken her time hanging up the phone.

After pulling my recorder out and attaching the phone mic, a handy little contraption with a suction cup on one end and a 3.5 millimeter plug on the other, I taped the message five times in a row before hanging up. Then I plugged my computer speakers into the cassette player and listened while burning through two cigarettes.

The voice wasn’t familiar whatsoever, but that could have been from the line distortion. What really puzzled me was the name she’d given. Becks? Was that short for Rebecca? The number was from California, so maybe my mystery caller’s parents had given her a misspelled hippie name like Bex or Beqz. I was pretty sure I’d remember someone with that name, though.

The only women I knew in California were Maggie Barksdale and my sister. I called my sibling first, forgetting she was on a two week cruise until her voicemail message reminded me.

Maggie answered on the first ring.

“Speak.”

“It’s Charles.”

“What do you want?” The words were curt, but I knew she didn’t mean anything by her tone. That was how she always spoke over the phone.

“I just checked my messages and someone left me one without telling me who they are,” I explained. “Did you call me?”

“No, although I might have tonight. I got a hot tip on an internet startup that’s going to go through the roof.” Her patter ran at a breakneck speed without losing enunciation. “You want to get onboard for a few hundred shares?”

“You’re buying into an internet startup?”

“Yes.”

“In this day and age?”

“Yes. A lot of folks are too skittish, just like you right now, so we can buy and hang onto it for a little while. Then when the stocks hit the stratosphere, we walk away with a good profit. Do you trust me?”

“I do, but--”

“Are you in or out?”

“Um. Out. I don’t think I should--”

“That’s cool. Call me on Monday, sometime in the afternoon. I’ve got a deadline on this script. Bye.”

I hung the phone back up, amused. Maggie always talked like a bulldog on too much coffee. She’d been my agent for a short time back in 1998 before handing me off to Joe and moving to Hollywood. Not only did she represent various actors and artists, she also had acquired an addiction to internet day trading. A non-sense battleship, she rarely made bad decisions in either stocks or clients.

Further introspection gave me no clues. I replaced the speakers and fired up my computer. After spending a night at the old place with no connectivity I had a slew of emails to answer – some of them regarding work, too many from fans of my art, and a couple from personal friends. None from anyone named Becks or Rebecca, and nothing from Doug and Trish.

That last discrepancy didn’t surprise me at all. Rick had warned me that they were obviously pros, which meant they’d try to fence the paintings first. I probably wouldn’t hear any demands for weeks.

On the way back from retrieving my second beer, I glanced around the walls of my new home. It eased some of the knot in my shoulders, and I ran a hand down the unblemished white in the hallway, smiling. After years of frustration and working my butt off, I finally had a place all my own. Not an apartment, not a townhouse, no roommates.

“Mine,” I said aloud as a familiar stirring hit my hands, a pull toward the recently filled garage. I shook my head and took another swig of beer. “Hell no,” I muttered. “No work until Tuesday. Not until I get everything over here.”

My hands didn’t listen so I kept them busy playing video

games and surfing chat rooms long after the sun went down.

By the time midnight rolled around I was pretty inebriated. Beside my desk seven empty bottles poked out of the trash can like branches on an alien shrub, and I was busy blowing skull-faced zombies to hell when the phone went off.

After the initial jerk of surprise, I paused the game and grabbed the handset without checking the caller ID.

“Hello.”

“Charlie?”

My heart lurched into fourth gear.

“This is Charles. Who am I speaking to?”

“It’s Becks.”

“I see,” I finally croaked. My mouth was as dry as an old bone. “You’re the one who left the messages today?”

“It’s me, Charlie. I’m about to get on a plane and go out there.”

“Wait.” I leaned back and grabbed a cigarette, alarm shoving its way through my alcohol-soaked haze. “Who are you?”

The only answer was a throaty sob, the kind of sound someone makes only when they’ve lost something of infinite value. I opened my mouth but too many questions simultaneously wrestled for control of my tongue.

“Hello?” I finally managed.

“Charlie, listen. You still haven’t remembered. I’m coming out there, I’ll make you okay again, wait for me and trust me please, please Charlie,” she blubbered, her words streaming out without pause. “I love you, he fucked with both our heads but I can make it right, I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

“What?”

But the line had gone dead. I sat and stared at the handset and the way it shook in my hands. I sat there for a very long time, wondering what was going on. Finally I looked up her number on the caller ID and dialed it, my finger quivering so badly that I had to hang up and try four times before I got it right.

“Hi, Charlie.” Her voice was softer now, incredibly hoarse.

“Do I know you?” I tried to keep the panic out of my voice as I repeated the question.

She barked a bitter laugh.

“Yeah, you do. Or did. You could say that we knew each other better than anyone else on earth.” In the background an amplified voice made a smudged announcement. “I’ve got to go. Let me call you when I get to the hotel, okay?”

“Now hold on,” I said angrily, but the line was dead again. I stabbed the TALK button, and the phone redialed. She picked up on the first ring, and I didn’t wait before speaking. “Are you working with Doug and Trish? Are you part of their fucking plan, lady?”

“What?” She sounded confused. “Who are you talking about?”

“Are you coming out here to make some demands? Because if so, you need to tell them a couple things first.” My heart beat a fast staccato into my ears from pure rage. “Tell Doug that he needs to call me *right now* before I deal with any of you fucking people. Tell him that if I don’t get a call, then... then we have no deal and I will go *directly* to the *fucking cops!* You got that, lady?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about,” she replied after a momentary pause.

“Then who are you?”

She sighed. “I’m Becks. Not as bulletproof, not as indomitable, but I’m Becks. I *have to go*. And I love you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“STOP SAYING THAT!” I screamed the words into the dead handset and threw it against the wall. It rebounded and fell to the floor on its back, like a dying cockroach.

Five minutes later I paged Detective Heese.

THREE

“Sounds like you’re having all *kinds* of fun there, Charles.”

Heese’s voice reminded me of Willie Nelson’s. Kind of medium pitched, smoky and bearing an almost indiscernible country twang. At the moment, his normal tone was further roughened by a lack of sleep.

“Yeah, loads.”

“Alright, first off I’m gonna charge you extra for this call. It’s almost one in the morning, and on a Saturday to boot.”

“How much extra?” I winced inwardly and headed for the fridge with the cell phone. Rick laughed on the other end of the line.

“Just a joke, Charles! Just a joke. I’m already charging you a flat rate for the whole trip anyway.”

“Forgive me if I’m not readily amused, Detective.” I cracked the bottle open and chugged. My prior buzz had been all but killed. “You told me to notify you if anything came up.”

“It’s fine. What did she say her name was?”

“Becks, or maybe Rebecca.”

“And she said that she knew you?”

“Better than anyone else on earth.’ Those were her exact words.”

“Huh. Maybe an old flame from your high school years?”

“Not a chance. I only dated two girls in school, and neither of them would be too hot to get back with me.”

“Don’t be so sure. You made the big time now, so you might have old lovers pop out of the woodwork. I’ve seen it happen before.”

“The two girls I dated were Elise Johnson and Brandy... uh...” I couldn’t remember her last name, although it was on the tip of my tongue.

“Brandy, you say? She ever go by a nickname like Becks?”

“Never. I know that for a fact.” What had her last name been? It was Robinson or Rutherford or something.

“Did this new mystery woman give you a last name?”

“No.”

“Okay. The number you gave me is 909-555-2516, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“I’ll call you back in a few minutes,” he said, and I hung up the phone. After a bit I picked it up and turned it on low ring, no vibrate. The computer had been the only thing making noise, and a supernatural quiet had taken hold of my new house. The last thing I needed was a buzzer going off and setting my nerves on crushed glass edges.

My ears still itched when the muted chime went off not long after that.

“Hello?”

“Her name’s Rebecca McGraw,” Heese said nonchalantly.

“That one ring a bell?”

“Not even a little bit. How did you find that out so fast?”

“It’s in her voicemail message. Her phone must be turned off, ‘cause it picked up immediately. You know a lot of people in the 909 area code?”

“Well, that depends on how you look at it,” I said, lighting what felt like my millionth cigarette. “My sister lives there, and I grew up in Big Bear Lake. I still know a few people...”

“But nobody matching your caller. Got it.” I could hear him chewing on a pen, one of the nervous habits he did constantly in front of me. “It’s late here, Charles, and I need to be up by dawn if we’re gonna meet tomorrow. Page me if any emergencies come up, but otherwise just keep any further developments to yourself until I get there. You okay with that?”

“Sure thing. I just thought this might have something to do with the Cohens.”

“And that’s perfectly understandable. See you tomorrow.”

After I made sure my shotgun was at the foot of the couch and loaded, I grabbed a blanket and slept in the living room. My mattress was still at my old apartment, and the decision had yet to be made whether or not to throw it away and just buy a new one. I turned off the lights and laid down, not minding the sofa one bit – it was a huge, L-shaped sectional I’d bought the second my agent

had handed over my most recent check. The cushions felt like sponge cake.

Tomorrow's Sunday, I thought. Time to finally empty out the old place and move the Vulture. What a strange idea that was. I'd created it in the apartment, and putting that monstrosity in my new house felt dangerous; the same as if I'd decided to have a live cobra put into the wall.

I turned over, waiting for sleep to hit. What *had* Brandy's last name been? It bothered me that I couldn't remember. She was the second girl I'd ever gone to bed with, and somehow the loss of her last name felt ungentlemanly. Thirteen years or no, I wasn't the kind of guy who easily forgot the names of women I'd made love to.

My eyes slipped shut and I faded away.

It's amazing what being robbed and then stalked can do to your dreams. The Vulture haunted my mindscape for the first time in years, its chewed-leather wings flapping overhead against blood-red skies.

I ran, scampering over rotten cactus and the corpses of trees, slipping and sliding across piles of dinosaur scales and cold meat. Every time I looked up, the Vulture's runny eyes locked onto mine and I felt the terror spike again.

I KNOW WHERE YOU ARE. Its voice was sickening, the sound of baby fat melting in a propane fire. *WE WILL BE TOGETHER.*

My bare foot slid on the edge of a rock, and three of my toes were sliced off as neat as you please. Crying out in a mixture of terror and pain, I ran onward, knowing what would happen next, aimlessly fleeing as I felt a heavy thud behind me. The Vulture breathed happiness in and exhaled hatred, it ate my severed toes and shit out bones as brittle as chalk and twice as bleached before taking to the sky again.

YOUR NAME WILL BE EATEN.

A poorly timed stride sent me sprawling against bushes of rusty steel. When I stood and ran, my left arm stayed behind on

the shrapnel like a hideous Christmas ornament on Satan's tree. The wings rushed downward again, the impact hammered my ears, I fled screaming as the Vulture's horrible beak clacked and mulched my arm down its throat.

Stumbling along a dry riverbed in the scarlet light, clambering over the tangles of ruined wheelchairs and toppled obelisks, I fought for breath in the scarlet dust. The bird's shadow darkened the skin of my back every so often as it swooped and decided what it wanted next.

STOP FIGHTING ME.

My already mangled foot caught in the strips of a decaying body bag, and I fell flat against a tangle of razor wire. Spiders danced across the skin of my inner thigh, and I turned to face the sky, pulling the barbed steel with me as I did so, tiny knives pulling into my flesh as the beast dove in for the kill. Dripping, crusted eyes glared down at me, the misaligned tips of the beak arrowed for my chest like a pair of guided lances--

I bolted upright on the couch, my arms crossed over my face and my jaws clamped shut. The cell phone went off again. I stared around the room, panting and covered in sweat as morning sunshine sliced in through the blinds.

The Vulture. I wiped the moisture from my face and reached for the tiny silver handset.

"Hello."

"Good morning, Charlie." It was the same voice, minus the hoarseness and very friendly. "Did I wake you up?"

"Yeah, actually. Thanks." I checked my wristwatch, surprised to find it was already ten o'clock. "Listen, uh, Becks?"

"That's right," she said, obviously glad that I'd remembered.

"Is the number you gave me a cellular phone?"

"Yes. That's what I'm talking on here."

"I see." My bladder fired off a protest, and I stumbled toward the bathroom. "Where, exactly, is 'here,' if I may ask?"

"The Hyatt at DFW airport. I told you--"

"Do you have any plans for the next hour or so?" The words surprised me a little even as they came out of my mouth.

“No. I only came out here to see you, Charlie.” Her words gave me a prickling chill. Their tone was entirely too familiar.

“Let me call you back after I’m a little more awake, right?”

“Sure thing.” She sounded chipper, nothing at all like the frantic woman who’d contacted me the night before. “I know better than to ask you to think before your coffee.”

“Thanks,” I said, and hung up at the same time that my urine hit the toilet bowl. Her guess hadn’t impressed me at all. Everyone I knew drank coffee in the morning.

About ten minutes into my shower, a sudden thought hit me. I rinsed the conditioner out of my hair and ignored my razor. After turning off the water and rubbing barely dry with a towel, I threw on a pair of shorts and a tank top before bolting outside to my car. The yearbook lay on the back seat. I grabbed it and went inside, pausing only long enough to fill a mug with java before plopping the book open on the kitchen counter.

Scanning through the pictures with one index finger, I found what I was looking for three pages into the SENIORS section. There was the girl I’d dated briefly in my sophomore year.

“Matheson!” I laughed the name aloud and sighed. “Brandy Matheson!” It felt good to say it, not for any long-hidden affection for her but because it really had made me feel guilty to have forgotten her last name. The picture in front of me was over a decade old. It had been taken eleven months after Brandy and I had broken up, and I wondered for a second what had become of her. She probably didn’t tease her hair like that anymore, and...

I blew a scalding cloud of coffee dangerously close to the yearbook, choked for half a minute and set my mug down before examining the girl to the right of Brandy. The other girl wore a moderately short bowl haircut, a do that I couldn’t recall as being stylish in ‘93. She was cute in a tomboy kind of way, with high cheekbones and full lips and eyes that needed no makeup. She had given the photographer a devilish grin, one that didn’t fit the fancy cashmere sweater on her shoulders. The girl looked like any second she might jump up and throw a water balloon at you, an imp hiding out in the row of three other perfectly normal students.

Her name hit me like a smack in the face.

Brandy Matheson

Rebecca McGraw

David Mealman

Tony Mendoza

Denial tried to find purchase in my brain and failed miserably. The student body at Big Bear High couldn't have numbered over 700 students, less than a quarter of whom had been in my graduating class. I could still recall most of the people on the page, even the quiet loners I'd never spoken to. I stared at the face of Rebecca McGraw and gulped more caffeine, digging for even the slightest memory of the girl in the page... and coming up empty.

When I found the strength to walk again, I grabbed my phone and called her back.