

Prologue

It was the light that terrified me.

It flooded through the gaps between the door planks, slicing into the darkness of the cellar: searing light that escaped from the storage room to form a tableau of bone-chilling familiarity. Because only a week ago, I had written a description of this very tableau.

I hadn't felt such dread since I was a nightmare-prone little girl. But this was neither déjà vu nor nightmare. This was real. The stench of mold. The chill that tightened my scalp and set my teeth to chattering. The thrush-thrush of blood pulsing in my ears. The taste of fear.

"Vanessa?" My voice died in the echoless emptiness. I had never been here before, but I knew this door, and knew with sickening certainty what I'd find behind it. My lips contorted into a rictus grin and I shivered.

In the nightmare version I'd written to spook myself and any future readers, the door had opened without human agency. The skin on my arms tightened into gooseflesh. I held my breath. Nothing happened. This was reality. I had to reach out and plant an icy thumbprint on the wrought iron latch.

A snick, a tug, and the door reluctantly swung open, the hinges sighing with regret. Wafting out, a sickening odor my brain refused to identify.

The searing light confirmed my worst fears

Book I: Charlie Novak and the Dead Pigeon

Chapter 1

Tampa, Florida, Saturday, December 15

Although Charlie Novak had killed over a dozen of Owen's wives, he took offense when his business partner asked him if he'd done something as shocking as slitting Vanessa's throat. It wasn't his style. Besides, it wasn't her time yet.

Just like a normal person, Charlie'd been about to dig into his breakfast of steel cut oatmeal, fresh squeezed orange juice, English muffin and French roast coffee when the phone rang. Not his house phone, which was reserved for robocalls. This was his burner phone. Only one person on earth had this number.

Eyeing his cooling oatmeal with regret, he let it ring a few more times while he took a sip of coffee and a bite of his muffin. He finally picked up.

"What now?"

"Vanessa was murdered out in California. Her throat was slashed. Was that you?"

Charlie choked on the muffin. He dropped his cellphone on the kitchen counter, reached for his orange juice and took a hasty sip, hoping to dislodge the bolus threatening to strangle him. His breathing passage finally clearing, he took another sip of orange juice and coughed up a few more crumbs before he retrieved his cell and managed to croak out a response. "The fuck you talking about?"

"Vanessa. Murdered. Out near San Francisco."

"Who says so?"

Owen's wireless voice came through a scrim of static. "A police detective was out here

yesterday to question me. Robert Mazurski.”

Charlie leaned forward, planting his elbows on the counter, his mind spinning in several directions at once. Was this simply a random act of violence? Who could have done this to Vanessa of all people? What had triggered the killer? And the big one: Why their pigeon?

“In case you forgot, this is six months ahead of our schedule.”

“I didn’t forget.” Charlie took a moment to gather his thoughts. “This cop. He flew all the way from the west coast to.... Where you at, Chicago?”

“I’m sure he wanted to see my reaction when he delivered the news. Gave me all the gory details. The poor girl bled to death.”

“You know that’s not how I do things.”

“Then it must’ve been someone else,” said

Owen with a dismissive air.

Charlie sat for a long moment, his alarm bells growing louder. He tried a spoonful of his oatmeal, but it had already cooled. He stabbed the spoon back in the bowl. “This murder. When did it happen?”

“Couple weeks ago. Saturday, December first. As it happens, I was in Cleveland the whole weekend.”

“Lucky you. Looks like you dodged a bullet.

So to speak.”

“I even have the receipts to prove it. I gave copies to Mazurski.”

“Then you’re in the clear. So far.”

“What do you mean, so far? I’m in the clear, period.”

Charlie said nothing. Arguing with Owen could be exhausting. He took a sip of his

cooling coffee and set the mug down.

But he couldn't just let it lie. The situation was too fraught to take any chances. "Listen, Owen. You'd best not file a claim just yet. Soon as you file, Little Rock Beneficial will tell the cops about Vanessa's million dollar policy, with you the beneficiary. Alibi or not, you don't want to hand anyone a reason to look harder at you."

"Let them look."

Charlie tightened his grip on the cellphone. "You really want a bunch of homicide detectives poking around? Digging into your history? Putting one of your cheap-ass false IDs under a microscope?" Owen sighed like he'd heard it all before. He seemed oblivious to the fact that the IDs he bought would never stand up to a rigorous homicide investigation. Or that any loose thread could end up unraveling his entire marital record: an alarming number of dead wives and more than twenty million in insurance payouts.

Charlie had urged him to pay the extra money for stronger IDs, but Owen resisted any advice, convinced his plan was foolproof. And while accidental deaths seldom triggered deep scrutiny, you never knew when something unusual might crop up. Like murder.

"Let's hope they don't go digging. In the meantime, hold off filing the claim. Let's give this Detective Whatsit...Mazurski time to clear the case. Nail the killer. How did he strike you? Competent?"

"Very much so."

"I'll check him out." Charlie jotted notes. "Anyway, even if you did file now, the money would be held up during the investigation."

"Which you could be monitoring. As a senior investigator and all."

What felt like an icy serpent crawled out of Charlie's scalp and wended its way down to

his buttocks. His entire torso twisted in an involuntary shudder. “Listen, Owen. I don’t want to go anywhere near it. I’m not comfortable with the both of us tromping around in the net.” All he needed was to get himself tangled up with a bunch of homicide cops, letting his ugly face appear on Mazurski’s radar. No thank you.

“Don’t worry. Just go on about your business. But Owen? Be sure to check for messages every day. Where you heading next, Ohio or Pennsylvania?”

“Youngstown. Keely’s expecting me.”

Owen’s other current wife, a cutie with short hair, a boyish figure, and about ten months left to live before one of Charlie Novak’s little accidents did her in. “Tell her ‘hey’ for me.”

Charlie disconnected and sighed. In all their ugly history, this was the first time one of Owen’s many wives died of something other than Charlie’s meticulously planned accidents.

An ice-cold ache seized the ghost of his lower left shin. He reached down to massage his stump. Like an arthritis flare-up warning of rain, his missing part sometimes flashed pain signals when trouble was headed his way.