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THE  
**IDENTITY CHECK**

**Ken Merrell**

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## PROLOGUE

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THE OLD WOMAN HOBbled off the bus and squinted at the setting sun. It blazed on the western horizon, its rays like rainbow daggers piercing the thick cataracts that covered her tired eyes. The storm had passed quickly, typical of desert downpours. The damp Vegas air smelled of wet asphalt and dustless desert plants, scrubbed clean by the sudden downfall. Cars, their hurried drivers hunched over behind the wheel, sped up and down Rancho Drive. Whirling tires splashed the oily residue from the street, spinning it into a misty cloud that hovered and clung to the newly washed air, then drifted and settled again on everything within its toxic reach.

The entire process would start all over again with the next spring storm. In a concrete-and-steel cycle of life, such periodic rain storms granted new soul to the wasteland town when they came thundering through. Precious life, unnoticed by passersby, clung inside a crack of the concrete curb where the old woman stood. The dry autumn seed had fought for sun and moisture, struggling up from its long winter hiding place, soon to feel the fate of the scorching summer heat. Like the old woman, the seedling would constantly seek refuge, then shrivel and die, its remnants blowing to some forgotten spot when it reached the final measure of its existence.

The wrinkled woman, too, wandered where the wind would blow. South when the wintry air bit at her corrugated arthritic hands, and still further south when the frigid arctic front once more plunged from the land up yonder. As the months passed, when the sultry, sluggish atmosphere choked at her tired lungs, she'd hop a train and venture northward to a more inviting town. Each city held favorite places to rest her tired bones, friends who made her vagrant existence bearable. Year after lonely year, from one more short span of time to the next, she drifted.

But this evening the old woman was on a mission. She leaned to-

ward the busy street, listening to the passing cars, measuring a safe gap to scurry across. Pursing her lips, she licked the bitter taste of the dirty mist from her toothless mouth and clutched tightly to a small stack of tattered envelopes she held in her crooked fingers. Then she launched over the curb, fording the west side of the street like a wise old cat. Pausing in the median, she hitched her cotton calf-length skirt back onto to her bony hips and tugged at the pinched boxer shorts that lay beneath.

Word had gone out on the street: *The deposit box was stationed on Rancho Drive, near the old Husky station scheduled for demolition and a new shopping center soon to come.* The sound of traffic died as the distant light choked the more sluggish, less fortunate travelers to a stop.

The old woman had been called Becky as a girl; nowadays, few knew her name. Her close friends were numbered like family and had busted their hides to collect the precious mail she anxiously sought to deliver. “Come on, Belle,” she mumbled under her breath as she scooted from the center of the street and landed safely on the opposite curb.

Mail hadn’t come easily. In some cases it had come illegally. Garbage cans had been torn apart and mail boxes opened. Addresses had been located and houses staked out. But the mission had been accomplished—and now the fireworks would begin.

Her head slumped to the side, and from the corner of her eye she labored to make out the letters on the overhead Husky sign. Then she turned and shuffled to the teller window. The chubby-cheeked woman inside the small glass booth slid her window open and smiled at the weathered patron. “Can I help you?”

The old woman’s voice croaked in a crude southern accent. “You got a mail drop?” The words exhausted, her cheeks puckered involuntarily.

The teller’s face maintained its luster. She offered to take the mail and drop it in the box.

Hesitant to give up her loot, the haggard face crinkled even more fiercely. “I got it—if’n you’ll just show me where it’s at.” The teller directed her to the opposite window, where, one by one, the vagrant bent to insert each precious letter into the metal drop box. With a sigh of relief, she then returned to the street, opposite from where her hasty pilgrimage had begun. She plopped down on the bench and crossed her tired legs, waiting. In quiet conversation she mumbled, turned to the

side, listened and replied.

Fume-belching buses roared past as the old woman lingered. A handful of customers pulled from the cluttered boulevard to sidle up to the aging pumps to fill their metal coaches. Through it all the near-blind stray, hunkered, talked, listened. She sniffed the air. The passing traffic carried the rich aromas from the evening restaurants and stirred and blended them with exhaust vapors.

Once-glorious sun rays now melted into the reflection on the soft, orange clouds; the shadows faded into inescapable night. The old woman nodded, her head of matted gray hair slumping low, her lucid state of consciousness drifting into a dreamy world of bacon and grits. The thick-cut strips of pork sizzled on an old potbellied stove situated at the rear of a small shack. The crying of an infant wakened her from a morning nap.

“Ain’t you got my grub done yet?” A rancid voice from the past jerked the slumberer’s head to alert. The sound of a pattering Audi pulling into the station mingled with the gruff words. Its driver unfolded from his car, hoisted the deposit box onto his extended belly and shoved it in the trunk of the smoky old rattletrap. Finally, when the car had pulled away, the old woman let out a breath, stood, cocked an ear to the busy street, and raised her arm to hail an approaching bus.

Fifteen minutes later a single vagrant sat perched on a bench in front of American Bio Medical—wide suspenders hiking up tight trousers, a Yankees baseball cap pulled down low on his melon-sized head—and watched the Audi pull to a stop on Carson Street, in front of Eddie’s gym. A massive black man, legs like tree trunks, swayed from the glass door at the front of the dilapidated brick building. He collected the metal mailbox from the Audi’s trunk, tucking it like a tinker-toy under his balloon-like arm before returning to the gym. After locking the glass door behind him, he sauntered down the hallway, past the bench presses loaded with lead weights, and rapped his imposing knuckles on a thick metal door leading to the basement. In a few seconds the door opened. Two skinny arms protruded and pulled the box into the darkness of the stairwell. Then the door banged closed.

The mailbox was placed under a naked light bulb in the cluttered basement room. The dim bulb, hung by two wires fastened to a rusty nail extending from a rough-cut wooden rafter, swung back and forth ever

so gently. The boards of the ceiling groaned from the heavy load of the monstrous man, lifting weights from a bench above.

One of the two men in the basement slipped a shiny key into the metal box and popped the lock open. "I could take him," he hissed as he scanned the rafters and dumped the contents of the box on the table.

"Yeah, right! He'd squash you like a cockroach, Roy." The second man shook his mane of hair and let out a guttural laugh.

Roy dropped his hand in his pocket and jerked it out. The practiced rattle of tooled metal and hardened steel snapped to a stop and cut the dusty basement air as it faded into the cracks and crevices of the partially finished room. "Not if I sliced him." Roy held a ten-inch switchblade in his hand, waving it through the shadowy light like it was Excaliber.

"Why don't you shake that thing at him—I dare ya'," the second man scoffed before bending over the table to peer through a magnifying glass. With painstaking precision, he returned to his task of putting the final touches on the Nevada licence in his hand. His name was Ivan Lion—or Dean Tidwell, or half a dozen other aliases, depending on the state he lived in at the time. "He'll snap that blade in half and shove it down your scrawny throat. You'll end up like a baby bird with your beak flapping open."

"I'd cut him first," Roy boasted.

"Shut up Roy and finish your work. The place stinks like a barn and the crap's seeping through your teeth."

His glossy grin now dimmed, Roy folded the knife and jammed it in his worn jeans. He mumbled incoherently as he sorted and stacked the envelopes along the edges of the desk, recording numbers on a yellow legal pad. "I got a pile of 'em here that ain't got numbers," he said aloud.

Ivan peered over his half-rim glasses at the figures on the yellow pad, then went back to his work. "Process them the same as you do the others," he growled.

Roy glanced back and forth between the pile of tattered mail and the man giving orders, then thrust the loose mail under a nearby phone book. A few minutes later he stood at the base of the rough-framed basement stairs and tapped on a closed door. It creaked open. When the bright light from the room flooded across Roy's face, his thin lips widened into a grin. "Jackie!" His wolfish eyes scanned his prey in a lustful

gaze. “How ‘bout you and I . . .”

“Stuff it, creep!” A woman’s gruff, baritone voice boomed from beyond the door. Then two shapely arms reached out and yanked away the mail he held in his arms. Roy propped his elbow against the wall and dropped one foot behind the other in a casual stance. The woman’s verbal onslaught took on an even more vicious tone. “You’re so stupid—you just don’t get it, do you?” Then, just as abrupt as the exchange had begun, the door slammed against its hinges.

Roy’s lecherous grin stretched to reveal a hint of dimples in his cheeks. Peeling his pride from off the wall, he pranced back to his desk like a barnyard cock. “She wants me. I’m telling you—she wants me.”

“Sure . . .” Ivan mumbled. “Whatever you say, Roy.”

The skinny man toppled into the squeaky chair, his back toward Ivan, and raised the phone book. *I’ll show them*, he thought as he peeled open the envelopes. *I’ll show them all!*

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# ONE

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GREG HART SLUMPED behind the wheel of his '72 Olds Ninety-Eight, which reeked from the stench of dogs and rotting upholstery. His dark, greasy hair fell down over his high forehead in tufts each time he nodded forward, drifting closer to a drunken stupor. Clear, thick fluid oozed from his pointed nose—a rather grotesque appendage that flattened and widened as it spread down on his grim face. The residue clumped to his unshaven, deeply creased upper lip, then coursed sideways, making its way down over his chin to form long, rubbery strings on his grungy designer shirt. Between drinks he raised his head, blinked his dark, bloodshot eyes, and combed his filthy fingers through his stringy hair to pull it away from his face. Muttering aloud the jumble of words scrawled on the columns supporting the overpass, he desperately fought to stay awake. Vulgar utterances slipped from his wet lips between each gulp from the bottle he kept wedged tightly between his legs.

He'd long since stopped calling on God for help in overcoming his problems. His response to the summons and complaint filed by his estranged wife's attorney had been due three days ago. There would be no answer. His third—and last—attorney would no longer represent him without a minimum \$20,000 retainer, an amount that wouldn't even cover his past-due bill.

The lime green wreck was parked under the I-15, Rio Grande bridge, the dirty recesses of the city's arm-pit. The dim light of a nearby street lamp burned at his blurry eyes as a passing train rattled the rusty doors on the car and shook the ground as it rushed on its way, thundering past him under the bridge. Earlier that morning he'd stopped by the house to drop off his final paycheck so the children could eat. Linda had told him the trustees' sale of their home would be on the front steps of the county courthouse by ten the following morning.

The near-empty bottle of vodka was only the second thing he'd

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