

Excerpt #1

Rachel waited until Shane was gone before turning her attention back to the deputy. His nametag identified him as Joseph Gonzalez.

“And so another wonderful evening gets ruined, thanks to Craig Walker.” She let out a disappointed sigh. “I first met Shane, the man who just left, back in high school, but I never really talked to him until tonight, and I could tell something wonderful was about to happen. Then you showed up.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I’m just doing my job.”

Her toned softened. “I know you are, and I’m sorry for being rude. This really isn’t your fault. You got duped by Craig Walker, just like I did.”

He motioned for her to take a seat in the corner of the lounge. As she settled into her chair, he took a small notepad from his pocket and sat down across from her.

“Okay, Ms. Bennett, can you please tell how you know Mr. Walker?”

“Craig Walker is an ex co-worker who I first met in Reno, Nevada, where we both worked for a magazine.”

“Were you ever romantically involved with him?”

“No.” Her head shook as she spoke. “Mr. Walker and I have never been romantically involved. It was strictly a business relationship.” She went on to describe their talks in the break room, and how he had turned on her after she was hired as the new art director.

“So,” said Gonzalez, “you said he was reprimanded after this incident. Did the harassment stop after that?”

“He never actually spoke to me after that, but he still gave me the evil eye whenever he saw me. And he always made a point of contradicting me at staff meetings, even when everyone else agreed with me. I probably could have said the sky was blue, and he would have said no, it was green. And then things started getting really scary.”

“What do you mean by scary?”

“I started getting some really nasty emails in my personal account. They came from different senders, but they all had pretty much the same verbiage. I was a hack who didn’t know how to do my job, and the only reason I got my job was because I’d slept with the boss.”

Changing my password and blocking the senders didn't seem to help. So, I finally went back to my supervisor, but I was told that unless I could prove Craig was the sender they couldn't do anything about it. They suggested I open a new email account."

"Did you?"

"Yes. And after that I made a point of not checking my personal email from my work computer. Later on, I found out someone was using the contact form on the magazine website to complain about me, but management simply ignored it. They knew what was going on; they just didn't want to get involved. It was about the same time we learned the magazine would be going out of business."

The deputy went over his notes. "You mentioned something about this not being the first time you had an evening ruined by Mr. Walker. Could you please explain what you meant by that?"

"Back in Reno, it seemed like every time I went out with friends, Craig would be there. If we went to a bar or restaurant, he'd be at another table. If we went to a movie or show, he'd be seated in the auditorium; always giving me a cold, hard stare. It was as if he knew my every move, even though I'd made a point of keeping my private life private. I never discussed any of my plans with co-workers. Then there was Eric."

"Who was Eric?"

"Eric Hawthorne was someone I was seeing while I was in Reno. It wasn't anything overly serious, but we enjoyed each other's company. So one night while we were out having dinner, Craig was brazen enough to approach Eric in the men's room. He told him what a lying, two-faced bitch I was, and that I was sleeping with the boss, and why was wasting his time with someone like me when there were so many other women out there who were better? The confrontation apparently didn't last long, maybe a minute or so at best, but it really made Eric mad, not to mention how embarrassing it was for me." She sighed. "Eric sent me an email a few days later. He said he was sorry about the problems I was having with Craig, but he wanted to end the relationship. He wished me luck and hoped there'd be no hard feelings. After that, I never heard from him again." She paused to gather her thoughts. "Once again, I went to my supervisor. She said she was sorry, but since it happened after hours and away from the office, they weren't going to get involved."

"I see." Gonzalez scribbled down more notes. "Is there anything else?"

“Other than the fact that he harassed me via the company email account at my next job, and through social media, I can’t think of a thing.”

“How did he do that?”

“I was working for an advertising agency [which](#), for a time, had the company email directory posted on its website. They eventually took it down, but by then it was too late. Craig had my email address. The harassment started once again, so I had to set up a new email account. He’d also set up social media accounts under different names and send me friendship requests, as well as friendship requests to some of my other online friends. Then, after I’d unknowingly accept the request, he’d post some pretty inflammatory rants about me. I’d report it, but they never seem to do much about it. They just tell you to block them if you find them offensive, as if I hadn’t done that already. I even tried going to the police, but they just don’t seem to take these things [too](#) seriously either.”

“Well, Ms. Bennett, I’m sorry you’re going through this. Unfortunately, what you’ve told me would be considered a civil matter, so unless he were to actually harm you, or damage your property, there really isn’t much we can do either, other than take a report. You may want to consider going to court and filing an injunction against harassment.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know. I’ve heard it all before, but I’m afraid taking him to court is much easier said than done. All I can tell you is I’m really losing faith in the system.”

Excerpt #2

It took some time for Craig to find his way around Reid Park, but he eventually found the Desert Sunrise alumni picnic. He casually strolled around, pretending to be just another park visitor on a balmy Saturday morning. Before long, a bench near the playground opened up. [He](#) took a seat and watched the people go by. The picnic had a good turnout, but so far he hadn’t spotted Rachel among the crowd. He checked his watch. It was half past eleven. The picnic was supposed to last until two, so perhaps she hadn’t arrived yet. He reached for his phone and checked his messages as he watched the caterers set up.

The scent of grilling hamburgers and hot dogs soon filled the air. His mouth watered and he made a mental note to grab a burger on his way back to the hotel. He leaned back on the bench and kept a close watch on the crowd, but still no sign of Rachel or Bill, her companion

from the night before. People soon lined up for lunch, and he waited patiently as the crowd worked its way through. He checked his watch once the last person was served. It was nearly one o'clock and the games were starting, although a few late arrivals were still showing up. He remained on the bench until the caterers started breaking down, then he slowly rose to his feet and brushed himself off. Part of him was disappointed she hadn't shown up, but the rest of him felt elated. He had succeeded in scaring her off. He smiled to himself as he strolled back to his car.

Excerpt #3

Shane reached for his phone. He'd gotten a good look at the license plate on the red pickup truck, and he prayed he was right; someone from California really had recently moved into Rachel's neighborhood, and all the truck sightings were simply a coincidence. Once he arrived home, he put Lucy out and placed a call. To his relief, it didn't go to voicemail.

"Northrup Investigations."

"Lamar. It's Shane."

"Hey, Shane, how you doing? I sure hope you're not calling to give me a hard time about not coming to the class reunion. I really was in the middle of a case."

Shane was intrigued. "So what was it? Some sort of cybercrime?"

"Well, sort of. Someone thought one of their employees might be embezzling funds, but he didn't know who."

"Well, at least it had something to do with numbers. I still can't believe you ended up becoming a cop and then a private investigator. I always figured you'd be the next Steve Jobs."

"Nah." He heard a chuckle in Lamar's voice. "One Steve Jobs was enough, and there'll never be another one like him. Besides, I love this job. It's much better than being a cop. Better pay, and a hell of a lot less stress."

"I'll bet."

"And I've just started working with a community outreach program for African-American youth." Lamar's voice pitched with excitement as he spoke. "And let me tell you, those kids can really keep you on your toes, but it's great to be a positive role model, and that's what it's all about." His tone changed. "But something tells me that's not the reason why you're calling."

“No, I’m afraid it isn’t.”

“I see. So what’s up?”

“It has to do with Rachel. Rachel Bennett. I saw her at the class reunion, and since that time we’ve become good friends. You may remember her. She took our math club photo for the senior yearbook.”

“Did she? Sorry, but it doesn’t ring a bell. I know the photo you’re speaking of. I just can’t recall who took it. So, what’s going on?”

Shane quickly got to the point. “A few years ago Rachel was working in Reno, and she befriended a co-worker who, unbeknownst to her, wanted to be more than just friends. Then she got a promotion that he felt she didn’t deserve, so he turned on her and started stalking her. Later on she took another job in Arizona, so he cyber stalked her, at least for a time. Then he turned up at the same hotel where we were having our class reunion, and as soon as he saw her, he called the cops. He made up some story about her harassing him.”

“I have to ask. Did she know he’d be staying at the same hotel?”

“No.” Shane’s voice was firm. “I saw her reaction when the sheriff’s deputy showed up. She was genuinely scared, although she tried her best to hide it. Then, after she left, I went into the bar and struck up a conversation with him. The guy is creepy as hell, Lamar. I can certainly understand why she’d be afraid of him.”

“So what exactly did you say to him?”

“I gave him a phony name and told him I’d only met her that night, but it was obvious, by the things he said, that he’s a total control freak who has to have it his way or else.” A chill ran down Shane’s spine as he spoke. “Then he asked me if I was going to the alumni picnic the following day. Fortunately, Rachel and I had exchanged phone numbers, so I called her the next morning and took her to a movie instead. After that, we thought the guy was gone, but now I’m not so sure.”

“So what happened?”

“Earlier this evening, as we were leaving a restaurant, a red pickup truck drove past us in the parking lot, and Rachel got upset as soon as she saw it. Apparently she’s been seeing it around her neighborhood for the past few weeks. It has California plates, and since you’re in San Diego, I was wondering if you could find out if the truck is registered to a man named Craig Walker.”

“Do you have the license number?”

"I sure do." He [opened his notepad app and](#) read it to Lamar.

"I'm at my computer, so let me see what I can do. You said Craig Walker, correct?"

"Yes."

Shane waited anxiously for Lamar to come back on the line.

"It's a red Dodge Ram pickup, registered to a Craig Thomas Walker with a Sacramento address."

Shane's blood turned to ice. "[Damn.](#) You're sure about that?"

"Positive. It's on the screen right in front of me."

Excerpt #4

Craig grabbed a burger at the nearest fast-food drive-thru before he headed home. Once he arrived, he went straight to his study and logged into Rachel's email account, munching on [his](#) fries as he casually browsed through her inbox. Among the announcements about the latest sales at her favorite stores was a message from her sister. He unwrapped his burger and read the message. Alice and Donny's wedding and reception would be held at the La Corona Hotel in the nearby town of Oro Valley. She was confirming the day and time, along with all the other details. He plopped down his burger and printed out a copy of the email. Once it came out of the printer, he marked the message unread and resumed browsing through her inbox. He found a message from Pilar, wishing her luck with her dinner plans and she hoped Shane would like the lacy red underwear. Her words jolted him and he tossed the remains of his burger aside. As he reread the message, his stomach twisted and his jaw clenched. So, Rachel had found herself another boyfriend. He leaned back in his chair, silently fuming as he recalled the scene in the parking lot the night before. He reread the email several more times more before finally marking it unread and logging out of her account. It was getting late, and he had to get ready for work.

The motel was in between night auditors, so Craig was filling in until they found a permanent replacement. Working the night shift gave him plenty of time to work on his human smuggling story, but being a day sleeper also meant less opportunity to keep watch on Rachel. Hopefully it wouldn't be much longer. He tossed what was left of his dinner into the trash and headed off to shower. Ten minutes later he was out the door, once again slowing his truck as he drove past Rachel's house. The blue sedan was still there. He hesitated for a moment, but if he lingered too long he might be late for work. He clinched his teeth and drove away.

Excerpt #5

Rachel gathered up her purse and Shane's parents walked them out to their car, where all the goodnights were said. As they pulled away from the curb, Shane noticed the change in Rachel's mood.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I'm just a little tired. I really did put in a long week this week."

"I know you did, but you also seem a little upset."

She sighed. "I guess I got a little thrown when your mother referred to Craig as an old boyfriend. Trust me, I never, ever dated the man. I never so much as went out to lunch with him."

"I know you didn't, and I'm sorry that happened. Sometimes Mom gets so wrapped up in her own stuff that she gets things mixed up. She also gets a little too over protective at times, but believe me, she never meant any harm."

"I know she didn't, but you have no idea of just how much people don't understand what I've been going through. They always assume it's somehow my fault, or that I somehow encouraged him, when I never did."

"I know you didn't, Rachel."

"And I'm glad you understand, because a lot of people don't. You wouldn't believe some of the stupid remarks people have made, such as, 'Well he obviously likes you, so why not give him a chance? You might even like him.' Uh, no, I don't think so. The thought of going out with him actually turns my stomach. Another time some woman said to me, 'Gee, I wish I had your problem. I can never get a man to give me a second look.' To which I wanted to respond by saying that perhaps she was too stupid to get anyone to notice her, but I was polite. I simply told her anytime she wanted to trade places it would be okay by me. Then there's the old standby, 'Boys will be boys,' excuse. Really? So does that mean that because he's a man, it's okay for him to stalk me like a predator and make my life a living hell? Give me a break."

"I know, Rachel, and I'm sorry. Believe me, I've been trying to help you as much as I can."

"I know you have, and I'm truly grateful for everything you've done for me. I'm just tired and stressed. I wanted so much to make a good impression on your folks, but once again, thanks to Craig Walker, I failed. Miserably."

| “No, you *didn't* fail miserably. In fact, I could tell they liked you, Dad, especially. Trust me, I know the signs.”

 “Well, that's certainly a relief.”