



# THIRD WHEEL

A NOVEL

**RICHARD R. BECKER**

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Hardcover ISBN 979-8-9853811-5-3  
Spark Trade Paperback ISBN 979-8-9853811-6-0  
Kindle ISBN 979-8-9853811-8-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023907368

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Cover design by Richard R. Becker  
Published by Copywrite, Ink.  
Produced in the United States of America

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First Edition

*For Jim*  
*Can't dance. Might as well laugh.*

## CHAPTER 1

# BLOOD BROTHERS

**M**ick and I jumped into the pool to cool off. We were hot, having just cut the twenty-foot oleanders that framed his family's backyard to eight feet, about a foot higher than the dull gray cinderblock walls that cemented boundaries between families.

They called them privacy walls in Las Vegas, making the backyard barbecue subculture of this desert suburbia feel all the more exclusive. It took more effort to be a nosy neighbor than it had at my childhood home in the Midwest, where kids ran barefoot across open backyards with toy machine guns and water pistols.

Nobody did anything like that in the desert. Unless you owned a pool, people hid away from the heat inside with central air or outside under big trees that were as foreign to the area as the people who called it home. We had one of those big trees in our unusable backyard, which is why I considered myself lucky to have Mick as a best friend. His family owned a pool.

Helping cut down oleanders was a small price to pay for having what amounted to a second home. Sure, the work was hard but bearable. It had taken us the better part of the morning, attacking the bushes with machetes and trying to make the job go faster by pretending to be the living incarnations of our Dungeons & Dragons characters. We

imagined hacking away a path through the Amedio Jungle on an adventure.

Like our characters, Mick did most of the muscle work, while my approach was more akin to a ranger or woodsman. It suited us. We had custom modeled his character after an overman out of a Lawrence Watt-Evans novel because he was a big kid, already standing six foot three at the end of ninth grade. I was a year behind and not exactly short, about five ten, but my frame was growing faster than I could fill it. So he hacked, and I trimmed.

Looking up at it out of the pool confirmed we had done a good job. We deserved to take the rest of the day off. We might have too, had the two brothers who lived in the cul-de-sac behind our houses not taken the shortened privacy wall as an invitation. They hopped right up on the bricks and looked down at the tangle of branches, leaves, and pink and white flowers that we would clean up tomorrow.

"Man, you're both nuts." Travis whistled, surveying our work. "You should have used a hedge trimmer."

"Didn't have one." Mick shrugged from the water.

"Yeah, who does?" Travis laughed.

"What's your point?" Mick said, putting his arms up around the side of the pool.

Travis was the more annoying of the two brothers. They were another year behind me and already had a reputation as being punks. My younger sister was friends with a girl who lived next door to them, and I always told her to steer clear. We mostly did the same, except when it came to business.

"Hey, Mick," Trevor said, swinging his legs over the back wall and perching himself between two of the haggard oleanders. "Give us a dime?"

"No way, unless you got cash," Mick said, grabbing a towel off the yellow and green plastic tubing of the lawn chair. "Your credit isn't good with me anymore."

"You're kidding me, right?" he said. "I'm not good for a dime?"

"You already owe me twenty, and I was coming over to collect today."

"So, what's stopping you?" Travis said, crossing his arms.

"I'm waiting for Alex. He's the one floating you."

They didn't like hearing it. And truth be told, I didn't like hearing it much either. Alex was the most troubled kid I had ever met, but Mick added him to our group anyway. Alex always had a sour milk sort of look about him and a permanent smirk that suggested he knew an inside joke about you. Some people thought it was because he felt superior. I knew better.

His gray-tinted aviators and long-sleeved concert T-shirts hid the marks his mom's boyfriends made on a regular basis. Somewhere along the way, long before we knew him, he stopped caring about anything — black eyes, cigarette burns, schoolwork, life. You might even feel sorry for him if he wasn't such a jerk.

"Yeah, you'll get your money tomorrow," Trevor said.

"Thanks for nothing."

Trevor flung his legs around his side of the wall, ready to follow his brother until Mick stopped him.

"Hold on," Mick said. "I can give you a pinner. It's all I got."

"Yeah, what is it?" Trevor asked.

"Skunk," Mick said, climbing out of the pool before registering Trevor's disappointment. "I was saving it for later."

"All right." Trevor smiled and shrugged. "Beggars can't be choosers."

Mick walked over to a side table where he had left his Velcro wallet. Tucked inside was a skinny joint. Had we smoked it, Mick would have crushed it into a pipe.

"It's cool," Mick said. "Alex's filling the store today anyway. Tell your friends."

"I'll do that," he said, reaching down to take the joint before jumping down.

I shook my head. Their friends were degenerates.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked.

"It's good for business," Mick said.

"As long as you deal with them," I said. "I don't like dealing with them. Besides, now we'll have to listen to Alex gripe all afternoon about the money they owe us."

Mick gave me a funny look. He was always pulling stunts like this without thinking it through. He wanted to be a nice guy in a bad business. I didn't have any delusions about it. We were running a modest criminal operation out of his house, which wouldn't have been such a big deal if his dad wasn't a cop.

"I'll handle Alex," he said. "He's more my friend anyway."

He was right about that. When Mick struggled to keep his place on the high school basketball team, one of his teammates slipped him some speed. It gave his game a lift, but not a



passion for the sport. He decided to quit but not before getting the name of the dude who supplied it. It was Alex.

The first time he came over, I didn't know he was a pusher. He sat down at the dining room table with us, filling our friend Brett's chair to play Dungeons & Dragons. Brett had moved away to West Virginia at the start of summer, leaving us in a lurch for a third player.

Alex gave the game about twenty minutes before declaring it dumb, and then we spent the rest of the night siphoning more booze out of the liquor cabinet. Mick and me weren't novices. The first time we raided this liquid treasure chest, we split a bottle of Triple Sec with Brett. We drank it all, microwaved a dozen monster chocolate chip cookies, had our characters sack the Steading of Hill Giant Chief, and then retched most of it up before the night was over.

When Alex spent the night, everything took on a much more sinister tone. We turned down the lights, turned up Ozzy Osbourne's *Blizzard of Oz* album, and listened to Alex tout the merits of Anton LaVey, founder of the Church of Satan in California. None of it, Alex stressed, should be confused with a meandering game for nerds like I played. After a few more drinks, who could argue? While Mick and I would still play on our own from time to time, the game became a smokescreen for a real-life adventure, no characters needed.

"Hey, Brady," Mick said, extending his hand to help pull me out of the pool. "He's here."

"Cool," I said, feeling vulnerable in swim trunks as Alex rounded the side of the house dressed in a trucker's hat, Iron Maiden concert shirt, and bell bottoms.

"Hey, man," he said to Mick, giving him a high five and a laugh. "What's the skinny tonight?"

"The man's working graveyard, so we're down," Mick said. "You got the stuff?"

Alex smiled, showing off his retainer and the pockets of tiny bubbles that would sometimes build up on the corners of his mouth. He pulled a black canvas fanny pack around to his front and unzipped it, yanking the flap forward to show us the merch. Most of the pouch was packed with weed, but I could see a cigarette box, a few smaller bags of rainbow-colored content, and another with the all-too-recognizable white of cocaine.

I started to say he had a haul, but Alex made a face and held a finger to his lips. He was hushing me, and it wasn't in jest. It was a warning. I shook my head and turned away to towel off and grab a shirt. Mick was already dry. It didn't take long in the heat.

"Did Trevor and Travis pay up?" Alex ignored me.

"Nah, I gave them till tomorrow," Mick said.

"That won't do," Alex said, taking the pack off and stuffing it under Mick's towel. "This isn't all a party pack, so we'll need some beer or something."

"Right," Mick said, putting on his shirt. "I don't think they have it, but sure, we can walk over."

"No, but their mom will have it," Alex said. "She always has a stash of money somewhere around the house. How do you think they pay for anything?"

"Good point," Mick said. "They just smoked some too. Shouldn't be a problem."

"So let's go," I said.

"Not you," Alex said, pushing the towel at me. "You can watch the store."

"What?" I said. "Why not?"

"You're not needed," Alex said. "And I'm not carrying all over the neighborhood."

"Then I'm going home," I countered.

"Brady," Mick tried to appease me, always the peacemaker.

"What?" I said, pushing the towel toward him. "I'm not going to babysit his girly purse."

I was looking at Mick when I said it. That's why I never saw Alex's fist bending around my peripheral vision until he hit me square in the sternum. It was like a small cherry bomb had exploded in my chest, and I couldn't breathe, my lungs forgetting how to draw in air. Alex didn't stop there.

His other hand followed around and grabbed my Adam's apple, guiding me straight to the ground, and he cocked his punching hand behind him to give me another blow. It didn't come because I never had a chance. All I could do is lie there with his weight on my chest and croak out that I couldn't breathe. I said it three times before he released me.

"I'm tired of your smart mouth," Alex said. "You said you wanted in, and you're in, but this isn't a democracy. Do as you're told."

It would be a few minutes before I could talk, so I didn't try. I held up a hand in surrender and watched them leave. Mick had left the towel-wrapped pack on one of the lawn chairs. What stood out was that I was lying on my back in my best

friend's yard, and he wasn't offering me a hand up as he did from the pool. He looked at me with a strange expression, somewhere between disappointment and pity.

We had been friends a long time. Mick was already living here when my family moved in next door. We would have become friends sooner, but Las Vegas had this weird rule about busing middle-class kids to poor neighborhoods for sixth grade. It somehow made up for poor kids being bused to middle-class neighborhoods for eleven years. With Mick in seventh grade and me in sixth, we had different schedules back then.

We met when his parents had invited mine over for a get-to-know-you barbecue at the start of summer after that first year. It was important for them to get to know us because Mick's parents both worked the graveyard shift. If either of their kids ever needed help, they needed to know they could count on my parents. I would have laughed at that had they asked me, but they didn't.

Mick and I hit it off, and the first set of friends that I had made on bus rides to what we called the Beirut Sixth Grade Center fell by the wayside. Who needed them? My best friend lived next door.

We had been best friends for closing in on three years, and it never occurred to me that this might change. But something had changed. Maybe Alex wasn't a third wheel as much as I was anymore. Or maybe that's the way Alex wanted me to feel by leaving me out on the collection visit. It was hard to know.

I eventually got up off the lawn and made myself comfortable in the chair, clutching the pack on my lap. For a while, all I did was sit there and look at the walls that framed

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Mick's backyard. That's what it was all about in Las Vegas. You were on the inside or the outside, and I was always on the inside with a gram of confidence and an ounce of doubt.



## CHAPTER 2

# BORN WILD

**Y**ou could always find a party on the west end of town, but Mick's house was the best. We had cultivated the sweet spot between those boring stand-around jock keggers and the rowdier hardcore crowds that bought from Alex but didn't hang with us.

Everybody knew to keep it cool because we had a good thing going. Both of Mick's parents worked twelve-hour graveyard shifts. They ate early dinners, packed up his sister to spend the night with grandparents, and didn't come home until sometime between six and eight in the morning. So the house was ours as long as we kept things low key.

If the neighbors ever called the cops, his dad would be the first officer dispatched. He was a bear of a man, barrel-chested and towering over everyone and everything at six foot eight. And while he came across as an oversized teddy bear, there wasn't anybody who wanted to test his jovial, good-natured disposition. He worked vice before returning to the dusty tan, green, and gold worn by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department.

There was no question he was formidable, subtly proving it by playing the part of a Nordic jokester. One of his favorite pranks was demonstrating any number of passive restraints he learned as a police officer — anything and everything from

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard R. Becker is the author of the best-selling short story collection *50 States*, which won first place in the Spring 2022 BookFest Awards for short stories, the 2023 Book Excellence Awards for short stories, and the ABR Book Excellence Awards for literary fiction, psychological thrillers, and short stories. It was also named a finalist in the IAN Book of the Year Awards.

The following year, he released a brisk ten-story companion piece called *Ten Threads* as a Kindle exclusive. *Third Wheel* is his first novel.

To learn more about Richard R. Becker, visit him at [richardrbecker.com](http://richardrbecker.com) or [copywriteink.com](http://copywriteink.com)