

## Chapter 1

*March 16, 2003*

*Payson, Arizona*

He thought he was dead.

Steam hissed from the crumpled front end of the RV that had folded accordion-style against the guardrail. His face stung from the punch of the airbag. His lungs burned from that awful talcum powder that drifted through the cabin as the bag deflated. The chemical dust, suspended in the air, seemed to be frozen in time.

His nose was numb and swollen. He tasted blood trickling down the back of his throat like a cocaine drip. He peered through the cracked windshield, his eyes adjusting to the reddish glow of a desert sunrise. The crushed-in hood had jarred upward. The chassis was off balance. The whole vehicle wobbled as he shifted his weight in his seat.

*Oh my God.*

He cranked the door handle and heaved his shoulder into it to pop it off the jamb. He hopped down onto the highway. The winds were heavy and dry, rustling the sage and scrub oaks that dotted the rugged landscape along the Beeline Highway. A sliver of fiery light barely illuminated the peaks of the Mazatal Mountains, which rose and fell against the horizon. Giant saguaros stood like sentries.

The back half of a red two-door sedan lay beneath the shredded front tires of the RV. Flattened like an aluminum can. On impact the RV must have bucked forward, rolling up onto the rear bumper of the smaller car, coming to rest on its roof. The significant weight of the RV crushed the sedan into something you might see stacked in a junkyard.

The highway was quiet. Just the rush of hot wind crackling the delicate spines of the sagebrush. He got his bearings quickly, the initial shock of the crash having passed. A sobering experience. Literally. Half a handle of Jack Daniels coursing through his veins had been replaced by something stronger.

Panic.

He saw long hair, a young female's. How he could tell her age by the back of her head, he would never know. Maybe by its length and sheen—bright, yellow-blond. Slick with blood. Her forehead propped on the steering wheel. The driver-side window blown out. The windshield was a shattered web.

The man beside her—or boy, he was arguably young—was out cold, his body positioned in the passenger’s seat in a gimpy, off-kilter fashion. The passenger side had been thrust into the guardrail, which molded itself to the frame of the car. His head lolled against the door. Blood leaked from his ear and ran down his neck.

“Are you okay?” he screamed, although he knew he would get no reply. His voice resonated throughout the valley. “Hello?”

He braced himself against the ruined front end of the RV. He felt a surge of bile and whiskey come up in the back of his throat. He heaved forward but held it in. He was lightheaded.

*Oh God, please let this be a dream. Oh God, please...this can't be happening, this can't be happening. This isn't happening. This isn't happening...*