

Chapter One

Nia Saldana didn't think today would be the day she died. Why would she? She was careful and avoided situations which drew too much attention. She never wanted to be noticed. When you got noticed, it only led to trouble, or worse.

She cursed herself for snooping around her employer's office as she tidied up. The big man wasn't who he pretended to be. If others knew what she saw...

Nia fought off anxiety driving home after another twelve-hour day cleaning homes on Camelback Mountain, the upscale enclave in Central Phoenix. Commuter traffic on this section of the 101 loop was a field of brake lights and her hands gripped the wheel, knowing she'd be home after her two girls were asleep. Her sister Sofia never complained when she watched the girls and loved them as if they were her own. Nia regretted every minute away from them, and the envelope of cash on the seat next to her meant she could stop and pick up a little pink box of day-old Mexican pastries for the girls as a sweet surprise.

A job that didn't require hours away from her girls was a dream. She didn't dare look for a better-paying job. There was too much at risk for a single, undocumented mother. One wrong move, like getting caught in her employer's office, and she would join her deported husband in Hermosillo. What would happen to the girls then?

She pushed a worn stuffed animal away from her leg when she caught a sudden blur from the right. A familiar black SUV cut across her path, nearly clipping the front end of her Nissan Sentra. She knew her boss was furious; in a way she'd never seen before. But to chase her on the freeway because of what she'd discovered? Reckless.

A pop caught her attention. Seconds later, the heavy SUV lurched and bumped Nia's sedan into the left lane, pushing her into the gravel median. A second pop sounded moments before the wheel wrenched from Nia's hands sending the Sentra into a hard spin to the left until it faced back into the oncoming traffic.

Rubber barked on the asphalt as a semi-truck slammed on its brakes and the trailer jackknifed, a wall of metal rushing toward Nia's windshield. The Sentra crumpled from the impact of the heavy eighteen-wheeler. The thin metal roof folded in pinning her against the seat. The steering wheel crushed against the driver's seat, and Nia with it. The pressure against her chest made breathing impossible. If her brother-in-law hadn't sold the airbag for a few dollars.... Nia glanced at the blood-spattered stuffed animal and pulled it close to her.

Inside her broken passenger side window, Nia watched as the SUV plowed into the metal rails in the center divider without slowing down. The driver slumped over the wheel after his vehicle came to rest. Why? Why did he? The grip on the stuffed animal loosened as she grew cold. The

faces of her two young girls were the last images she held while she slipped away.

Chapter Two

Detective Sergeant Nathan Parker weaved his way through the snarl of traffic on the freeway. Phoenix dwellers took it in stride because commute hours meant a sludge across the valley with a daily multi-car pile-up, or a disabled vehicle in the tunnel. None of the usual reasons for traffic meltdowns would justify a Major Crimes detective call out.

Parker's Maricopa County Sheriff's Office Ford Explorer was unmarked, but the antenna bristling on the roof and the flashing red and blue lights in the grill gave it away. As he approached, he wasn't certain what warranted a major crimes investigator. Parker spotted the vehicles spun out in the median, the front end of a compact sedan crumpled under a big rig trailer. No one would survive this one.

Fire engines stopped traffic in the two lanes near the accident. A single lane of cars bled through the remaining gap in the freeway, going slow enough to glimpse the gruesome wreckage.

Deputy Marcus Stone called Parker on his cell phone rather than make the call over the department radio frequency. The call was quick on detail, other than Deputy Stone needed Parker at the scene. Parker's mind shuffled through the possibilities as he pulled his Explorer to the far left median. He spotted the wrecked SUV on the center divider, twenty yards from the jackknifed semi-truck. A high-profile victim, or an influential Phoenix power player caught in a deadly drunk driving crash? Maybe. Politics was king, even in the desert. The twisted remains of the Nissan underneath the big rig, however, didn't scream of valley nobility.

Parker spotted deputy Stone near the rear of the Phoenix Metro Fire Department engine. Stone looked gray.

"Marcus." Stone didn't take his gaze from the fire crew using an air powered extraction device, sometimes called the Jaws of Life, to peel back the exposed left front quarter panel of the gutted Nissan Sentra. "We've got two deceased." Stone jutted his square jaw at the Nissan. "A young woman. In the SUV against the guardrail, our second victim, a middleaged white male."

"Looks nasty. Any statements from witnesses about how it happened. Why'd you call me out, anyway? Traffic accidents aren't usually our thing." Stone started toward the SUV. "Come with me." Stone didn't wait for Parker and made a path around the littered wreckage toward the black SUV. Parker noticed the driver slumped over the wheel after the fire department opened the driver's door and left him in place. From experience, Parker knew fire crews extracted accident victims from the vehicles and tried to administer lifesaving treatment.

The driver's razor cut gray hair lay matted in crimson. His skull disappeared in a jagged mess of

blood and bone behind his ear.

“He’s been shot. Dammit, this makes three in a month,” Parker said. “That’s why I called you.”

Instinctively, Parker glanced at his surroundings. The freeway sat in the bottom of a wash, with city streets twenty feet above on both sides. An unnatural valley, but a natural killing ground for the Sun Valley Sniper. “Get any ID on this guy?”

Stone held a plastic evidence bag in his hand. Parker hadn’t noticed the deputy gripping the plastic envelope since his arrival.

“Roger Jessup. Local attorney, according to the Arizona Bar card in his wallet.”

“Can’t say I’ve heard of him before. Gives us an angle to look at—you know, the whole disgruntled client thing.”

They both turned at the sound of ripping metal pulled from the Nissan Sentra. Two fire fighters crouched into the passenger compartment, cut the seatbelt, and pulled the driver from the car. They placed her gently on a yellow tarp spread on the gravel shoulder.

“I take it she wasn’t a shooting victim?” Parker said.

“No. The collision with the SUV spun her out and then the big rig finished it. Wrong place, wrong time, poor thing.”

“You call in the Medical Examiner?”

Stone shook his head. “Didn’t know how you would handle it.”

“No problem. While I call the M.E., could you ask the fire crews to set up some tarps to give our victims a bit of respect?”

“On it.” Stone strode off to the closest fire fighter and started pointing at the scene.

Parker approached the Nissan as the fire department crew draped a tarp over the dead woman. Parker saw she was olive skinned, young, perhaps in her early thirties, with dark black hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was attractive, but even in death, she carried signs of stress, lines creasing her forehead, and dark bags under her eyes. Parker dropped to one knee and scanned the passenger compartment. The driver was crushed. If it wasn’t bad enough, Parker spotted a well-loved stuffed animal on the seat.

“Oh man. She’s got kids.”

He reached for her purse and pulled the inexpensive plastic and cardboard handbag from the

floorboard. Parker had seen these knockoff items before, carried by women coming over the border. He fished through the purse for a wallet and ID. Nothing. No driver's license, insurance cards, or credit cards. When he stood, he spotted a blood-stained envelope. When he lifted it from the seat, it held one hundred dollars. No note or message in with the five twenty-dollar bills. The face of the envelope bore a simple inscription: "Nia."

"Nia, what happened?"

Parker thought deputy Stone might be right. He was about to write it off as another case of a random victim until he found the bullet hole in the Nissan's front tire. The tire exploded outward on the opposite side of the path of entry. Likely sending the compact sedan into an uncontrolled skid, careening off any vehicles in the next lane.

What were the chances of two cars being shot at in evening commuter traffic?

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