

Chapter 1

State Trooper Chris Yarrow took his patrol assignment on the graveyard shift on Interstate 10 as a kick to the crotch. The desolate stretch of asphalt from Quartzite to Tonopah was as straight as a preacher's spine and as exciting as a Sunday sermon.

Six months. He was given six months on this worthless chunk of highway as punishment. His sergeant warned if he didn't adjust his attitude and become a team player, Yarrow would be on the outside looking in. Halfway through a shift cruising down the empty westbound lanes of I-10 Yarrow hadn't pulled over a single speeding motorist. Not because he didn't want to. There was no one out on this God-forsaken patch of asphalt. Not so much as a headlight in the distance.

He backed off the accelerator at the exit for the Devil's Well rest stop. Yarrow cruised through the freeway rest stop to ensure the truckers who pulled off for the night didn't have paid female company from Buckeye. Last week Yarrow turned a van full of young women away as they drove up, much to the disappointment of the lonely truck drivers.

Four eighteen-wheelers parked in diagonal slots. Yarrow's eye went to a cargo container strapped on a flatbed trailer. The tractor and driver were nowhere to be found.

Yarrow stopped behind the trailer and shown his spotlight on the boxy cargo container. No company markings or brand names adorned the side. The trooper pulled his computer console over preparing to run the trailer's plates. His light found the empty place where the registration should have been.

Yarrow stepped from his SUV and approached the trailer mounted cargo box, casting his flashlight under and around the steel frame.

"If it ain't officer buzzkill," a voice sounded from a truck window to the left.

Yarrow swung his light to the truck cab and recognized the driver as one of the frustrated truckers after the ladies of the night were turned away. His faded and frayed Dodger's ball cap, more grey than blue, was tucked on his head over a ring of red curls.

"You happen to see who left this trailer?"

"It was here when I pulled in," he checked his watch, "about four hours ago."

Yarrow strode to the front of the container, shone his flashlight at the end of the brown steel container. "Something leaking."

The trucker stepped from his cab hitched his pants up and joined Yarrow.

"Looks like the A/C unit bit the big one."

Yarrow avoided stepping in the puddle of refrigerant. "I'm gonna have to call the DOT crew out and get this cleaned up before it runs off in the desert."

"God forbid a coyote gets an upset tummy. Tree huggers like them woke DOT weenies is what makes everything we do more expensive."

"Why would a driver take the plates and leave his load," Yarrow asked.

The driver shrugged. "If he saw his A/C was busted, he knew his load got spoiled in this heat. If he's not a company driver, he could drop and run. Especially if he already got paid for the trip."

Yarrow circled around the trailer to the rear. The heavy steel hasp was secured with a heavy gauge padlock and a foil seal on the door.

"A customs inspection sticker," the driver said, pointing at the foil.

"This came over the border? All this way and the driver just drops it?"

The trucker leaned in, an ear close to the container. "Hear that?"

"What?"

“Listen.”

Yarrow leaned closer to the container. “I don’t hear anything.”

Another voice from behind startled Yarrow. “What ya got going on, Buck?”

Buck, the driver in his Dodger’s hat, glanced at the other trucker, “Might be an abandoned load.”

“Saw a guy in a white Kenworth tractor with no trailer burning outta here about five o’clock. Coulda been running into Phoenix to get a mechanic for his A/C.”

“Phoenix? We’re in the westbound lanes.”

“Like I said, the guy was in a hurry, he crossed the center median and headed back east, toward Phoenix.”

“I think he’s hauling bees,” Buck said, straightening his ball cap. “I don’t like bees. I keep me an epi-pen in my glove box.”

The other driver drew close and put an ear against the metal cargo box. “I hear them. I heard about bee rustlers stealing hives. Think deputy Do-Right here broke the case?”

“Would you guys back away. Quit touching the lock, Buck.”

Buck turned the lock loose and put his hands up in surrender.

“It might be evidence.”

“How you gonna know unless you look inside,” Buck said.

Yarrow pondered his options. If he called it in to his supervisor and it turned out to be dead grandma’s patio furniture from Sun City, Yarrow was done. The thin foil customs seal hinted at something more. Smuggled drugs maybe. If Yarrow could break a major drug trafficking case he’d earn his way out of this nighttime purgatory of an assignment.

Sensing Yarrow’s leaning, Buck said, “I got a pair of cutters in my truck.”

Buck trotted over to his rig and opened a tool box and withdrew a pair of heavy bolt cutters with two-foot-long handles.

Yarrow held them, surprised at the weight and forced the lock off the cargo door. He handed the bolt cutters back to Buck. When Yarrow slid the bolt a metallic clang echoed from within.

“You don’t mind, I’m gonna take a step back. I don’t need no bee stings.”

The buzzing sound increased and Yarrow began to second guess his decision to open the container. He pulled the heavy door aside and a swarm of insects flew from the crack.

Buck screamed and waved his arms against the winged attackers. “I need my epi-pen!”

Yarrow ducked behind the door as the insects flew from their prison. When they lessened, he leaned around and clicked his flashlight inside. He dropped the light on the blacktop and staggered back. The smell was overpowering.

No stolen beehives and no cache of smuggled heroin or fentanyl were waiting for Yarrow. Inside the darkened cargo container, dozens of dead men lay in a heap on the steel floor.

