

Chapter One

Death to a ten-year-old is a pause in a video game. It's temporary. A momentary setback until you're back into the game again. At their age, the boys of Boy Scout Troop 116 thought they were immortal. Or they did until they got their first glimpse of human remains.

Ken Dryden stood on the brakes, sending the fifteen-passenger van into a skid on the hard-packed desert road. A flock of eight turkey vultures pecked and tore hunks of flesh from their prey. The enormous birds didn't budge at the approach of the speeding white passenger van. Only one bothered to look up with a flap of meat hanging from its curved beak.

The birds ignored a loud burst from the van's horn. Dryden unbuckled and turned to the eight boys in the back. "Stay here."

Dryden and the assistant scoutmaster, Bill Cope stepped from the van and approached the circle of birds.

"Must've found themselves a coyote or something," Cope said. "Why you insist we take this road? It's in the middle of—"

"This can't be..." Dryden trailed off and crept toward the flock of scavengers.

"Whatever they found, they sure don't want to give it up," Dryden said as he waved his arms trying to chase the birds off the road."

"Don't blame them. Pickings are probably a bit thin out here."

From behind, a high-pitched voice called out. “Oh, cool. What did they kill?”

Dryden turned and three ten-year-old boys stood a few feet away gawking at the feeding frenzy on the hardscrabble dirt road.

“I told you guys to wait in the van.”

“What did they find?” The tallest boy asked.

“Probably a coyote or something run over on the road, Chase.”

“There’s no tracks in the dirt but ours,” Chase said.

The birds fought and squawked at one another, tearing bits of flesh out from the beaks of weaker birds in the flock. Wings flared and cupped over the remains, claiming them.

“Mr. Dryden? What’s that?” Chase asked.

“What?”

“That,” the boy said with a trembling finger, pointing toward the largest vulture with a torn hunk of flesh hanging from its red beak.

Dryden followed the boy’s line of sight and under the bird’s talons were the remains. He felt sick when he saw it. A brown work boot. Coyotes didn’t wear boots.

“Oh my God.”

“Is it a dead person? Chase said.

“Back to the van boys,” Cope said.

“But—”

“Now!” Dryden barked the order, and the three scouts scurried back to the van.

“Why did you take us on this back road to begin with? What do we do now?” Cope asked Dryden. The two adult supervisors of this scout troop stood at the desert crossroads.

Cope pulled out his cell phone. “No signal out here. We need to call 911.”

Dryden looked back to the van and all eight boys pressed up against the windows gawking at the human remains as the carrion birds devoured their treasure.

“We gotta get them outta here,” Dryden said.

He charged the birds, and most of them backed away. Dryden got a good look at what lay in the desert crossroads—a man, twisted, mangled, and broken. Huge swaths of flesh torn away by the feeding birds. Dryden’s shoulders drooped at the sight—a dead man left in the crossroads.

“I’ll try and keep them away. Drive the boys back out to Quartzite. Call 911. I’ll wait.”

“You wanna stay out here? In this heat?” Cope said.

“It’s early, the heat won’t top out for a couple of hours. I’ll take my pack and all the water we can spare. I’ll be fine. There’s a little shade over there under that Palo Verde.”

Tall, dry creosote brush and a few taller gangly green Palo Verde trees and Saguaro cactus lined the crossroads

“You sure? It’s not like you can help that guy?”

“Whoever he is, he doesn’t deserve to get eaten by these feathered desert rats either. How would you feel if it was someone you knew?”

Dryden retrieved his day pack and two canteens from the van.

“Guys, Mr. Cope is going to take you out. He’ll stop in Quartzite for a pee break.”

“I’ll stay with you, Mr. Dryden,” Chase said.

“Everyone’s going with Mr. Cope.”

A sigh of disappointment filled the back of the van. Dryden knew Chase’s mother was going to meltdown over her precious offspring’s exposure to the dark fringes of life. He figured the Scottsdale socialite would spirit her son away to a resort in Sedona for a crystal bath and chakra realignment.

Dryden hefted his pack and slung the canteens over his shoulder while the van cut a three-point turn and returned in the direction they came.

Once the dust and engine noise died down, all that remained was the breeze cutting through the dried brush and the cackling of the vultures fighting over their prize.

Setting his pack down, Dryden broke off a creosote branch and swung it in front of him forcing the birds away from the remains. Reluctantly, the birds gave up and hopped to the other side of the crossroads.

Dryden closed in on the dead man and grimaced at the mess the vultures made. Unrecognizable. Legs twisted and folded under the body, with a boot sticking out at an impossible angle. No way Chase would earn his first aid merit badge here.

The arms were flayed out over his broken head.

“Oh God.”

Dryden noted the wrists bound with zip ties. This wasn’t a lost hiker. This was a murder victim.

He snatched his cell phone and tried calling Cope to warn him, but the screen reminded him there was no cell signal out here. He shot a series of photos of the dead man, figuring the police would want to see what they found before the vultures could finish it off.

Dryden backed off into the shade and moved out when the vultures grew brave enough to advance. Back and forth for an hour until Dryden spotted a dust trail.

It was too soon for Cope to have summoned help. Quartzite was more than an hour away and the authorities would need time to respond after Cope called them. And this dust plume was coming from the other direction and building fast.

A dead man. Murdered. Alone in the desert. Only a twinge of relief. It wasn't someone he knew. He knew what that kind of loss felt like and felt guilty about feeling thankful. The dust plume was coming in fast and there was the faint whine of an ATV engine—high pitched and loud.

Dryden snatched his pack and blended into the brush along a game trail, hoping he didn't encounter an unfriendly javelina. Fifty feet from the road, he hunched down as a green ATV tore into the crossroads and skidded to a stop a few feet away from the body.

Two men stepped from the six-wheel ATV, and one used a bulky satellite phone. After a quick call, the two men donned gloves and picked up the remains, tossing them into the rear cargo compartment of the ATV. They weren't gentle about it—they were hurried. They needed several trips to gather the bits and pieces.

Once they finished loading the dead man, they sped off in the direction they came from.

Dryden waited until the dust plume died down before he stepped out from his hiding

place. He approached the spot in the center of the crossroads where the body had been. There was little to prove a life ended there. The red dirt was marked by a dark circle—what Dryden believed was blood. A single human finger was left behind by the men on the ATV.

A second trail of dust appeared on the horizon in the direction Cope and the boys used on their way out.

Dryden sank back into the brush again until the Black and Yellow Maricopa County Sheriff's Office SUV pulled to a stop near the intersection.

He couldn't stop thinking about the finger. Had they left the finger by mistake, or was it a message?

Chapter Two

Sergeant Nathan Parker, the detective leading the Maricopa County Major Crimes unit, pulled his county-issued SUV to a stop at the dirt crossroads.

"You sure this is the spot?"

Cope, the assistant scoutmaster, had ridden along with him to make sure Parker found the exact location. One of the parents met Cope in Quartzite and drove the van of excited boys back to Scottsdale while Cope waited for someone from the sheriff's office.

"I'm certain. I mean, I think I am. The dead man was right in the center of the intersection." He pointed ahead. "There. See the dark spot in the dirt?"

Parker opened his door and stepped from the SUV.

“Didn’t you say your friend was supposed to be here watching over the remains? They didn’t both walk off, did they?”

Parker thought he’d been brought out on a desert snipe hunt of sorts if it weren’t for Cope’s dead serious demeanor. The man definitely believed he saw a body out here in the remote section of the desert south of the Hummingbird Wilderness Area.

Walking toward the spot Cope pointed out, Parker figured the man panicked when he came across the scavenged remains of a road kill animal. It wasn’t unusual for deer, coyotes, or javelina to wander down from the wilderness.

Cope got out of the SUV when Parker reached the spot. It was blood-soaked. But there wasn’t anything to point to a human origin. What was odd was a set of narrow tracks, tracks with deep aggressive off-road tread, circling near the blood spill. Two sets of footprints ran from the tire tracks to the dark dirt patch.

“Where’d it go?” Cope asked a few paces behind Parker.

A rustle and snap in the brush to their left caught their attention. It sounded too large for the small game which thrived in the creosote brush. Seconds later, a man emerged from behind a tangle of Palo Verde branches.

“Ken! You all right?” Cope called out to his friend.

Dryden was red-faced and breathing fast when he stepped onto the road surface.

“Deputy. Two men. Took him,” Dryden said in between ragged breaths.

“Ken? Where’s your pack? Your water?” Cope asked.

Dryden shot a finger to the brush where he'd emerged. "Dropped them."

Parker noted the man wasn't sweating in the hundred-degree heat and showed signs of heat stroke.

"Let's load him in the SUV. Get him some water and let him cool off."

Cope helped his weak friend back to the passenger side of the SUV while Parker looked at the dried, darkened dirt patch for a moment. Something bled out here, but there wasn't anything to tell the story of what might have been.

Parker joined the two men at the SUV. Cope had gotten his friend into the passenger seat and found the case of bottled water Parker kept in the backseat. Heat related sickness was a deadly threat in the desert. Last year, six-hundred-forty-five people died in Maricopa County from heat stroke and exposure.

Cope handed Parker a cell phone. "It's Ken's. He captured these."

The small phone screen displayed a disturbing image of a man, freshly disfigured and broken.

"You saw this?"

Cope shook his head. "Yeah and so did the kids. What happened to him? I mean. He's—did the vultures do the damage?"

Parker slid his thumb to the next photo. The one showing the man's hands bound.

"Definitely not." Parker couldn't explain the severity of the crushing and bone breaking trauma. It was the worst he'd seen in nearly fifteen years on the job. He'd discovered migrants left in shipping containers, Cartel assassinations, beheadings, and vehicular homicides. Nothing

came close to the injuries in the photos.

“These remains were here when you left your partner behind?” Parker asked.

“They were right there, I swear. Ken wanted to stay behind and—how do you say it? Preserve the evidence. Those damn vultures were picking him apart. It didn’t seem right, you know?”

“Think he can tell us what happened to them?”

Cope looked back to the passenger seat. Dryden had his head back sipping on a bottle of water. The man was thin to begin with, an L.L. Bean shirt and day-old beard growth didn’t make him an outdoorsman.

“I don’t think he did anything with them, if that’s what you’re getting at,” Cope said.

“No. I don’t think he did. They disappeared somewhere and your friend was in the best place to see what happened.”

Parker stepped around Cope and opened the driver’s door. A waft of cool air-conditioned breeze hit him in the face. He gestured for Cope to hop in the back seat and out of the heat.

“How you feeling, Mr. Dryden?”

“Better. Thanks.” He held up the water bottle.

“Mr. Cope here tells me when he left you behind, there was a full set of remains out there on the road. What happened to them?”

“Two men. They rode in on one of those six-wheel ATV’s from that direction.” He pointed to the road heading to the east. “They took him—the body—they grabbed up the pieces

and tossed them in the back of the ATV. Then they ran back to wherever they came from.”

“They took him?”

“And they didn’t have an easy time of it. They needed a bunch of trips to get...”

“You get a look at the two guys?”

“Oh, I found this after they left.” Dryden pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and handed it to Parker.

As Parker unwrapped it, Dryden said, “I couldn’t risk the vultures flying off with it.”

Parker had a bad feeling about unwrapping the package. The last fold stuck to the torn skin and tissue clinging to a human finger. He wrapped it back up carefully. He pulled a small paper evidence bag from the center console and dropped the body part in the brown paper container.

“Who could do that to a human being? Animals. Why’d they leave that behind?” Dryden said.

“Couldn’t say. Maybe they were in a hurry,” Parker said.

“They were moving pretty fast when they left.”

Dryden’s eyes held back something. Parker figured it was shock from the discovery, or heat stroke. The guy was going to need years of therapy to get past this moment.

“I’m going to need these photos. I’ve called in our people to go over the scene. They can give you guys a ride back to civilization.”

As Parker pulled his cell phone out, Cope said, “No signal out here.”

Parker glanced at his screen and confirmed as much. Reluctantly, he reached for the SUV's radio. Transmitting a request for crime scene technical support would alert the media hounds who monitored the channel. At least he wouldn't be asking for a coroner to respond, which would inevitably attract news crews like bees to honey.

He made the radio call and snapped a series of photographs of the scene with his cell phone. The warm breeze coming from the south marked the potential for monsoon weather. Any evidence out here would be washed away. The deep ruts worn in the soil crossing the roadway testified flash flooding was a possibility in the remote desert drainage.

Parker caught photos of the quickly drying bloodstained soil at the center of the crossroads. The size of the stain had shrunk by half since he'd arrived at the location. The desert had a way of reclaiming any sign of life. It was the way of nature. It was the way of life in the harsh environment where man was simply another source of sustenance.

The ATV tracks leading east were disappearing in the wind-blown topsoil. The fine dust returning to its natural state. A section of tracks, sheltered by a wall of thick creosote brush, maintained the deep V pattern left by the off-road tread. Hundreds of weekend hobby riders ran their motorcycles and ATVs out in the desert on the weekends, and Parker hoped the photo would show some anomaly on the tread pattern to single out a particular vehicle. He knew it was a long shot, but he needed to cover the bases.

Finished taking photos of the area, Parker noticed a plume of smoke to the east, a dark and boiling column of smoke. He couldn't shake the connection of the missing body and the sudden appearance of the smoke rising in the east.

Parker trotted back to the SUV, made a quick radio call reporting the smoke and possible

woodland fire near the wilderness border. He tossed a traffic cone out on the desert track near the blood-soaked dirt. Maybe the crime scene analysts could find something to hint at why the body was dumped there—and why it vanished.

“How you doing, Mr. Dryden?”

“Better, thanks.”

“I want to go check this out up ahead—don’t think it’s far, maybe a couple of miles. You up for it?”

“I guess.”

“I want to get you checked out by medical, they’re on their way and they’ll meet us up the road.”

“What about the guys who moved that body? Won’t they be up there, too?”

“If they were in as much of a hurry as you said they were, probably not.”

Parker pulled the SUV into drive and swung hard around the bloodstained soil—not so much for destroying any evidence left behind, but out of reverence. A life might have ended there on the patch of dust.

Parker shot up the heavy rutted road to the east, bouncing along the trail as the dark smoke plume beckoned in the distance.

Two miles from the crossroad, Parker turned a slight corner to the right and found a small shack in flames. It was likely an abandoned decades old silver mining camp. No sign of an ATV or the two men who Dryden watched. But Parker had a bad feeling about what lay inside the burning shack.

“Stay put,” Parker said, as he pulled the SUV to a stop at a distance from the burning shack.

He grabbed a fire extinguisher from the rear of the SUV and trotted toward the structure. Most of the flames were coming from the inside of the wooden structure. They had burned up and through what remained of the wooden roof.

He shot a burst of white powder from the extinguisher at the doorframe, and the tendrils diminished for a moment. Enough for him to spot human remains on the floor in the center of the blaze.

