

Chapter One

Sucking stale air through a respirator, John Thomas Mitchell finally found his niche. He dropped out of high school because it wasn't his thing. The teachers said he wasn't being challenged. Truth was, John Thomas left because he'd learned what he needed to make it on his own.

Most of the people he interacted with only knew him as the Birdman. If you wanted the best high, the Birdman was the source. He wasn't a drug dealer; he was a connoisseur—a brand ambassador of pills.

"J.T., I got another five hundred bagged and ready," a reedy voice said through his respirator.

John Thomas pulled the lever on his manual pressing machine, one of his own design, and twenty white, perfectly pressed pills dropped out, each embossed with his own logo—a Blackbird in flight.

"We need another thousand for the college this weekend. It's pledge week, Cal."

John Thomas tapped the plastic container, shaking loose the snow-colored powder residue from the sides, and monitored the loose material as it flowed onto the dimpled steel plate where it would be formed and pressed into the coveted Blackbird doses. The perfect blend of Ecstasy and opiate.

A hard knock on the trailer's thick metal door reverberated through the old single-wide.

John Thomas and Cal exchanged a glance through drug powder dusted goggles.

"Cops?" Cal said.

John Thomas glanced at his watch. “Cops don’t knock. Must be our boy coming to pick up. He’s early. Get it would ya? I’m in the middle of setting up the next press.”

Cal scooted back from the workbench and placed the plastic-wrapped bundle of pills on the cheap folding table set up in the middle of the stripped-down trailer.

The knock at the door sounded again. This time, it came harder and rattled the heavy doorframe.

“All right, all right, I’m coming, dammit,” Cal said as he slid the two bolts that secured the door.

The moment he threw the door aside, a thundering blast echoed in the small space. Cal flew back against the far wall, a crimson blossom leaching through his t-shirt.

John Thomas fell out of his chair, and two gunmen, both dressed in black, wearing full-face respirators, stepped into the trailer. John Thomas crabbed backwards on the floor trying to distance himself from the gun-toting pair.

The closer of the two leveled a black shotgun at him.

John Thomas blanched. He looked away from the gunman. “Take it. Take what you want.” He held his hands up—submissive and cowering.

The gunman tipped his head to his partner, who stepped over Cal’s body and stuffed the bags of finished pills into a black nylon zippered duffel.

When the pills were tucked away in the duffel, the man backed away. The gunman didn’t lower the shotgun.

“You got what you came for. I won’t tell nothing,” John Thomas said. His voice thin and quivering.

Over his pounding heartbeat, John Thomas heard the gunman’s reply.

“I know you won’t.”

A flash from the muzzle and an ear-splitting roar filled the trailer. John Thomas lay sprawled on the floor. The gunman slung the shotgun over his shoulder and stepped around what was left of John Thomas’s head and grabbed the heavy pill press, dumping the powder that hadn’t been compressed on the floor.

He backed through the door and took a last look inside before his partner tossed in a plain blue backpack. They closed the metal door and jogged to where they’d parked their dark blue Ford F-150 pickup.

The pill-laden duffel went into a hardcover case. The gunman took less than a minute to strip down the pill press and remove the plates that formed the pills with their unique Blackbird signature logo. The two steel plates tucked into another hard case, and the mechanical parts of the press were tossed into a thick copse of creosote brush.

After the cases were secured in the back seat, the men got in, started the truck and backed away.

The gunman pulled his respirator off and tossed it into the back seat. His blue eyes fell on his cell phone he’d stashed on the console. He scanned it while driving on the rutted, washboard dirt road and dialed 911.

“911, what’s your emergency,” a voice sounded over the cellphone.

“Hey, I just spotted a pack of illegals busting into a trailer out near Vulture Mountain west of Wickenburg.”

“How do you know they were undocumented?”

“You can tell, and I heard gunshots.”

“What’s your name?”

The gunman hung up and handed the phone to the passenger, who slipped out the SIM card, snapped it in half and tossed the bits out the window.

“How long you figure it’ll take them to find the place?” the passenger said.

“Not long.”

The gunman pressed down on the accelerator toward Phoenix.

Chapter Two

Detective Sergeant Nathan Parker piloted his Maricopa County Sheriff’s Office SUV on the barely paved roads in the north part of the county known as Tweaker Heights. The largely undeveloped desert space wedged between Tonopah on interstate 10 and Wickenburg on the 60 was a prime location for operating a clandestine drug lab.

Parker glanced at detective Barry Johns in the passenger seat. Barry held a cellphone to his ear and held up two fingers. Two victims.

Drug ripoffs weren’t specifically listed in the fine print of the risk of doing business. There were rules. Usually, rivals understood that keeping the fragile peace meant hands off the

production side of the operation. The street-level sales and distribution were another matter. In many ways, Maricopa County was the wild west, where intimidation and payoffs ruled. There was a fragile truce in the business when all sides followed the rules.

When a drug lab stiffed a supplier, bad things happened. This was not a business that cared about promises or referrals to human resources for mediation.

Barry disconnected the call. “Fire department from Buckeye station 70 responded to a report of a trailer fire south of the White Tanks. About the same time, we got the 911 call about shots fired and undocumented migrants at the location.”

“Fire and reported gunfire could mean a lab take down. If the lab was connected to any of the biker gangs up in the north county, could be reprisal coming.”

“We have a deputy on scene. Wilson. Said it looked like a pill mill. Some precursor chemicals there. Possible fentanyl set up.”

“Great,” Parker said. That would mean wearing protective gear and respirators while working the scene. And having Narcan on hand for accidental exposures.

“Did the 911 call mention the fire?” Parker asked Barry.

The big man shook his head. “No. Gunshots only.”

“But the fire department responded to a trailer fire.”

“That they did. We’ll have to find out how they got the call.” Barry pointed ahead. The red and white Buckeye fire engine near a dilapidated single-wide mobile home that looked as if it had been parked there since the Carter administration. “How you want to handle this?”

Parker mulled it over for a moment. Two dead in a drug rip-off. No neighbors to canvass, unlikely witnesses, and the fire may have consumed much of the useful evidence. “You tell me, Barry. You’re lead on this one.”

Barry Johns was a solid detective with slightly over five years in grade. Parker knew him to be smart and dogged when it came to chasing down leads. A former college football standout, Barry was looking at a pro career when his knee betrayed him, ending his athletic eligibility. He was recruited by two Black colleges for teaching positions but opted to come back home to the desert and join the Sheriff’s office. Parker knew he was capable and savvy enough to get this investigation off and running.

Barry was feeling a little disconnected after his partner, Pete Tully, retired over six months ago. Getting shot in the chest will make you rethink your priorities. While Barry and Parker worked well together, Parker sensed Barry needed a chance to take charge.

Barry glanced over. “I’d start by running down the origins of whatever chemical compounds we have in the trailer. By the looks of it, Buckeye Fire got here fast. We might have something to work with. Then the trailer itself. I want to know ownership records from the day it was dropped out here. Same with the land itself.”

Parker nodded. “Want me to run down the trailer registration and property records? I know you’ll get all geeked out over the chemical mumbo jumbo.”

Barry grinned. “Yeah, maybe.”

A cloud of red dust enveloped the SUV when Parker eased the vehicle behind the Maricopa County unit. He waited for the dust cloud to pass before he opened the door. “Let’s get the update from Wilson.”

Parker and Barry found deputy Wilson standing in front of the Fire engine, some fifty feet from the single-wide.

A pair of firefighters were pulling a hose from the doorway. Both wore full protective gear, including the air tank for the self-contained breathing apparatus.

Wilson turned as the detectives approached.

“Detectives,” the deputy said.

“What can you tell us, Wilson?” Parker said.

“Responded to the shots fired call and arrived just as the Buckeye Fire crew pulled up. Looked like the fire was small and contained mostly inside. Not much smoke. Don’t know who reported it.”

Barry nodded to the two firefighters. “They discover the bodies?”

“They did. Said it was laid out like a drug lab inside. A line of worktables down the center of it. Our two victims—one by the door and the second toward the rear.”

“Did you get a look?” Barry asked.

“I grabbed a mask and got a look from the door. Snapped a couple of photos before the fire jockeys destroyed everything.” He held his cell phone out to Barry.

“Good thinking,” Barry said as he took the phone and scrolled through the set of images. He handed the phone to Parker.

“Gonna be tough to get an ID on one of them. Most of his face is missing,” Wilson said.

“What I don’t see here is the product. Gives some credence to the idea someone took this pair down,” Barry said.

“I did find these,” Wilson handed a sealed plastic bag to Barry. Five pills lined the bottom of the bag. All white with a distinct Blackbird logo embossed on them.

“This is where Blackbird came from?” Parker said. “These pills have been all over the county, especially the colleges.”

“Blackbird has a whole upscale vibe going on with it. Users claim it’s a good safe high. I always thought the stuff came from a pristine lab somewhere in Cave Creek, or Fountain Hills,” Barry said.

“You take down Blackbird and assume their distribution, you’ve got a goldmine,” Parker said.

Parker glanced at the trailer hulk. Taking over a drug operation was one thing. But if the chemist behind the Blackbird pills was one of the two dead men inside, then there was another darker element in play here.

“You ask for the Medical Examiner?” Parker asked the deputy.

“No, sir. Watch Commander said you should make the call.”

Parker nodded. Barry picked up on the pause and reached for his cell phone. “On it.”

“Ask for Dr. White,” Parker said as Barry stepped aside to make the call.

The firefighters backed out of the trailer and shut off their hoses. The pumps on the engine whined down to a stop. A fire captain in a white helmet stepped away from the engine and unbuttoned his heavy turnout coat. Parker recognized the captain from a callout last year near the boundary of the Hummingbird Wilderness. Two bodies were found in an abandoned mining shack. His name tag read, Drucker.

“Detective, I can always count on you to keep us on our toes. Had to use all our hazmat protocols on this one with potential drug exposures and explosive materials in the place.”

“Explosives?” Parker said.

“Let me show you.” The fire captain started walking back to the trailer.

“Can’t you just tell me about it?”

“Just put on your big boy pants and come with me, detective,” Drucker said.

Barry had finished his call, and Parker gestured him over. “The captain has something to show you.”

Drucker grinned. “That’s how it’s gonna be, huh?”

“His case,” Parker said.

“What’s you got?” Barry asked once he arrived at the trailer.

The odor from the charred insulation, plastic, and rodent droppings was intense ten feet from the trailer door.

The fire captain brought up an image on a tablet device. “Check this out. Far right corner, on the floor. A ragged hole in the trailer’s thin metal skin shown in the picture.”

Parker’s eye drew to the four small cardboard boxes on the warped floorboard. The label on the containers in large red letters read, 12-gauge 00-Buckshot.

“Shotgun shells? That’s your explosive?” Parker said.

“One box cooked off a round. The fire started in the corner of the trailer—outside actually.”

Barry peered at the screen. “The fire didn’t start from inside with whatever they were cooking?”

Drucker shook his head. “Looks like someone tossed a couple road flares under the trailer chassis and ignited the scrub, trash, and some loose flooring material.”

“Safe to go in?” Barry asked.

“It is. We put an ion detection beacon inside and it’s reading no residual meth precursor chemicals, no fentanyl, but we did get a hit on other known opiates. I’d wear a M-95 mask to be safe.”

“Not much chemical residue. Doesn’t that strike you as a little off, if Blackbird was being made here? Labs are usually covered in the stuff.” Parker asked.

Barry donned an M-95 mask. “The Medical Examiner will be here in twenty minutes. Our crime scene techs should be here before then. They were finishing up a robbery call out in Carefree.”

As Parker and Barry entered, the trailer listed under their weight. As Captain Drucker explained the fire damage inside was rather minimal. The heat melted a few plastic tarps in the corner, but the bodies were untouched by the flames. Unusual if the fire was started to get rid of the evidence inside, Parker thought.

The dead man nearest the door leaned against the back wall. A pattern of gunshot wounds, eight that he could see, tore through the man’s chest and abdomen.

To the left, inside, partially under a long worktable, the second body lay sprawled on its back. The man’s face was missing, or most of it. Bone, brain tissue, and teeth were visible at a

glance. Round holes behind the dead man meant he was gunned down at close range while his assailant stood over him.

Barry began shooting photos with his cell phone. While he was occupied, Parker spotted a blue backpack a few feet from the first dead man. There was something familiar in this plain blue model.

Parker took his cell phone and snapped a photo of the backpack as it lay in the blood spatter of the first victim. The backpack didn't have spatter on it, which meant it landed thereafter the drug dealer was shot.

Turning the backpack with a glove-covered hand, Parker noticed a tag on one of the shoulder straps. He didn't need to read it to know where it came from. It belonged to his son, Miguel.