

## CHAPTER 1

### Wishing To Be Young Again

It was 3:00 a.m. Jack sat on the second-story balcony's floor. The warm mauve stucco of the house pressing against his back relaxed him. He had been anguishing at his computer for hours tonight. Now, it was time for a break. His weight, cushioned by the soft insert taken from the lawn chair nearby, would have made the late-night experience meditative except for the noise. Between the slats of the balcony railing Jack watched the party below him. Arizona State University students were returning for another school year, and they filled the night air with youthful excitement. Kids away from home, not yet straddled with an overabundance of coursework, were whooping it up with a keg party tonight.

Hidden in the blackness of shadow that the full moon on the front side of the house cast over him, Jack was invisible to the anyone below. The rock music was loud. Punctuated by boys shouting and girls screaming youthful, flirtatious, fun-filled screams. The odor of marijuana drifted through the air and Jack remembered the years of youthful abandon during his own college days. A tear ebbed out of his eye, rolling silently down his cheek. Then another carved a trail down his other cheek. The despair he felt was overwhelming at times. It was coming. No one could stop it. Only one thing was certain: young people of this generation would never know the peaceful life he had known. What would become of them? He wasn't sure. The only certainty was that many would not survive to a time they called retirement. They would be dead long before their sixty-fifth birthday.

Turning his gaze from the merriment, and staring deep into the clear night sky, he looked over the Superstition Mountains in the distance, their steep cliffs alight in the glow of the full moon. The monsoon season had ended. The Arizona desert once again was soaked with the sun's angry rays during the day and cool breezes cascaded off the mountains at night. At forty-one, Jack was the youngest tenured economics professor at ASU's Carey School of Business. He also held the prestigious position of being the school's emissary to the Arizona Legislative Budget Committee, the ALBC. Jack lived a quiet peaceful life with his wife, Leigh, whom he deeply loved and who loved him equally in

return. He was glad that he and Leigh had chosen not to have children. It would only add to his depression about the future if he were a father. He probably wouldn't live to see the worst of the future, but he would see it begin. That's why he retired from the faculty. A decision no one—not even Leigh—understood.

Focusing again on the party below Jack's thoughts drifted to the future. He was still young enough to enjoy life with Leigh. They were both healthy, in good physical shape, and he was just beginning to show the signs of gray in his hair. He and Leigh were leaving Mesa, hopefully within a year. Their home was listed for sale, but the economy was still faltering from the economic shock of 2008. A tremor that foreshadowed the collapse Jack knew was to come. When the collapse did come—and it would come suddenly—people living in geographic areas that could not support them would perish first. The Southwest was going to return to the harsh land it had always been. A place where survival was difficult and destined to only a hardy few.

Feeling the sense of urgency to work on his book enter his thoughts, Jack was about to return through the double sliding doors of the balcony to his office when his next door neighbor, Bill Reeder, walked out into his backyard. Bill and Susan lived directly behind the partying students. Only a painted seven-foot cinderblock wall, universally used in dividing the homes in the Villages of Eastridge housing development, hid Bill from the students a few feet from him.

Clearly angry, Bill was talking to someone on his cell phone. He's probably calling the police, Jack thought as he watched Bill's animated arm pointing at the wall, watched him pace back and forth in his yard, and saw him suddenly point his cell phone toward the wall so as to make sure the person on the other end of the call received the full benefit of the loud party. Curiosity taking hold, Jack remained in his hidden position to see what would happen next. In Maricopa County, the sheriff ruled like a king. Having sheriff's deputies at your door was never a good idea.

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Less than one-hundred yards away from Jack's hidden perch on his balcony First Sheriff's Deputy Commander Jim Morrison had parked his white SUV in the garage of an abandoned home. Now, he stood alone inside the empty property. A foreclosure sign was in the front yard, its former occupants were one of many in the community who suffered the fate of the rapid collapse of Arizona's economy in 2008.

Morrison was not a tall man, and the years had put a roundness to his once tight and lean body. A career of stress, long hours of work, and life's worries had grayed his hair early. His commitment to his Mormon religion came with its own set of stressors, adding deep dark wrinkles beneath his once-bright blue eyes. Tonight Jim was in a better mood than of late. He felt more relaxed than he had in years. Tonight, Jim's troubles would be over. He was going to end them with a bullet through

his brain.

Jim's footsteps echoed on the tile floor as he headed toward the empty kitchen. The only sound in the house was his hard-sole shoes on the travertine tile. The pain medication he swallowed when he stopped at the shopping center thirty minutes earlier made him thirsty. He wasn't going to die with parched lips, so he headed toward the kitchen sink. Pulling the 9mm police-issue pistol from its shoulder holster and laying it on the countertop beside the sink—his hand rested softly on top of its cool metal. Turning on the water with his other hand, he reached into the cabinet above the sink and removed a plastic cup. First, I'm having a last drink of water, he thought filling the cup.

Jim was fifty-seven years old. The doctors agreed the pancreatic cancer consuming his body would make sure he didn't see his fifty-eighth birthday. Suddenly, stabbing pain shot through his abdomen as if to punctuate his fate. Dropping the plastic cup of water from his lips into the sink. He gripped the counter. His knuckles were as white as snow. He gritted his teeth, grimacing in tight-lipped defiance to the pain. *I'm sick of this pain*, he thought. *It's God's justice to have me die this way, but tonight I've made peace. Nathan will know what to do with the letter. The rest I trust to God.*

When the pain eased, Jim opened the oven door. What he saw inside was a thick leather briefcase filled with cash. The three had put the money in the oven for the same reason that

drug dealers keep their drugs near the toilet—to get rid of it in an emergency. Filled with despair, Jim impulsively turned on the oven, intending to send the \$450,000 dollars to hell. If he wasn't going to live to enjoy it, then Julius and Brett wouldn't enjoy it either.

Picking up the gun, he began walking through the dining room that adjoined a living room in the front of the house. For a long moment he stood in silence. Staring down at the moon's glow slicing through the living room's vertical blinds as it cast its snow-white light on the beige carpet at his feet. He wondered who had lived in the house before the bank had taken it back. Had children played in the backyard? He shook his head slowly, sad at how life had turned out for him. *Things are what they are*, he thought, muscling his strength, and pulling his thoughts back to the job at hand.

A man at the bank routinely gave the three of them keys to abandoned properties on request, no questions asked, and guaranteed that the property would be kept off the market as long as they needed to use it. *Of course*, Jim thought, *I mail him a cash payment every month for such loyalty*. The corruption disgusted him, but he was no better. There were two partners in Red River Investments besides Jim. The partner who provided bank connections was Julius, once a sheriff's deputy like him, but now an Arizona State Senator.

Jim pondered how it had come to this. Three once honest men, meeting in secret—hiding their investment activity from public view. It hadn't started that way. Their greed drew them from honesty with the slow sureness of a vine winding along its path to engulf a brick wall. Now, the stealthy trio moved from one empty house to another, never staying too long in one neighborhood for fear that someone might recognize one of them. It had been ten years since they were able to meet like normal business partners. Each year was worse. More secrets, more lies, and more deception. Jim felt like a criminal, and supposed he probably was a criminal, but he had never meant to be a criminal. It just happened.

The smell of the leather heating up in the oven began to fill his senses. Soon, the briefcase and its contents would be in flames. "Flames! Shit!" Jim said. "I'll burn the whole house down." He dashed to the stove, turned off its burner, and opened the oven door. Removing the briefcase from the oven, he sat it and its contents safely on the cool kitchen tile. A house fire was the last thing he wanted. The money needed to be in good shape when Nathan sent the Mesa Police to investigate. After reading the letter tomorrow that Jim had dropped in a mailbox half an hour ago, Nathan wouldn't risk a sheriff's deputy—the normal responding officer—coming to the house. The sheriff, Brett, was Jim's other business partner—and Nathan would know everything in a few hours.

“Stick to the plan, Jimmy,” he muttered, the pain pill taking a deeper effect. “Well, no sense in waiting.”

Walking farther into the living room to a folding card table with three folding chairs around it, Jim took a seat in one of them. He heard the noise of the student’s party a few houses down the street. No one would hear the gun shot with all that racket. And he might as well depart this world with the sound of hard rock vibrating off the windows of the empty house as anything. Not a bad way to die—listening to a new generation entering the adult world with a bang of their own. He had had his chance, now it was their turn.

Suddenly, Jim remembered the camera. He looked up at the air-conditioning grill on the nearby wall—the camera was motion activated and was surely recording him. Standing, he grabbed one of the folding chairs from the table and carried it to the travertine tile in the kitchen. Setting it down out of reach of the camera’s lens. *No sense ruining the carpet*, he thought. *And, I really don’t want to pain Nathan by seeing my last moments on video after the police search the house.*

Jim sat in the chair. Holding the pistol firmly in his hand, he pulled the slide to the rear, chambering a bullet from the gun’s magazine into its barrel. Years of practice made the motion automatic, but tonight the loud echo of the powerful spring driving the slide forward in the empty house startled him. “Damn!” he said, chuckling embarrassed at the unexpected intensity of the noise.



## The Journalist

The smile quickly left him. His face took on a tone as serious as death. Lowering his head, he looked at the pistol in his lap. He wondered if he had the guts to do it. There were no alternatives—not really. He wasn't going to die the slow painful death the doctors described. A quick twitch of his finger and the pain would be over. Accepting his fate, Jim cocked the loaded pistol and slowly raised it to his head.

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At twenty-nine years old, Jerry Fast was a confirmed loser. Jerry graduated from the sheriff's deputy training program six months earlier. His performance was poor, but because he was the sheriff's nephew, the instructors passed him despite their better judgment. Jerry's decision to join the force, and follow in his uncle's footsteps, came only because he was out of options, and because his uncle had assured him that the Drunk Driving Task Force was a job filled with overtime pay. He could still remember their conversation.

"It's gravy money," his uncle had said. "You volunteer for the third shift, and then you volunteer for the DUI Task Force. Arrest people at night, testify against them during the day, and earn overtime pay for the privilege. In this state, deputies on the DUI teams earn more money than I do." The fact that his uncle had made it clear—after getting the date-rape charge against him dropped—that his next stop in life was prison if he didn't decide to be a part of the legal system rather than oppose it motivated him.

What his uncle neglected to mention was that there is a one-year waiting list to get on that gravy train. Now, Deputy Jerry Fast sat in a patrol car rolling past dark deserted buildings every night bored to the bone. Tonight, Deputy Fast was patrolling the Bashes' shopping center on Baseline Road. He saw a white SUV sitting in front of Bashes' Supermarket—a lone male standing by the mailbox—as he drove around behind the shopping center, but the car was pulling out of the parking lot by the time he came back to the front, so he ignored it. Then, a call came over the radio for a unit to respond to a disturbing the peace complaint in the Villages of Eastridge.

“Dispatch, “ Jerry said into his microphone, “this is unit three two four. I’m a half mile away from that location. I will respond.”

“Roger, unit three two four,” the radio speaker squawked. “Go with red and blues off, so that you don’t disturb the neighborhood. That’s a pricey part of town. The sheriff wants to keep them happy over there.”

“Copy that,” Fast said, “Send me the GPS data.” *Maybe tonight I’ll finally see some of that overtime pay*, he thought glancing down at his on-board computer.

Jerry put the police cruiser in park, sitting in the parking lot, until the data downloaded to his on-board computer. Disturbing the peace was his first action. Otherwise, tonight was one more boring night in six-months of patrolling empty parking lots and sleeping neighborhoods. Jerry was excited. He took his

clipboard, noted the time and the call, and began driving down Baseline Road. It took only minutes to reach the location. As instructed, he kept his red-and-blue lights off. He followed the GPS to the address. Getting out of his cruiser, Deputy Fast saw a man appear from the corner of the house.

“Hi, Deputy,” the man said. “I’m Bill Reeder, the one who called in a complaint. Hear that party across my fence? That’s been going on all night. My wife and I can’t get any sleep. It’s three in the morning for Christ sake.”

“Sir, can we walk into your backyard?” Deputy Fast said.

“Sure,” Bill said. The two men walked around the house, neither seeing the motionless shadow sitting on the balcony to their right and above them. Deputy Fast heard the music pounding, then he smelled the odor of marijuana in the air.

“Yeah, I smelled it too, Deputy,” Bill said, noticing the deputy’s change in demeanor.

“You know what that is, Sir?” Deputy Fast said.

“Son, I’m sixty-two years old,” Bill replied. “Anyone alive in the Sixties knows that smell is marijuana.”

“I suppose,” Fast said. “I need to call this in.” He walked away from the wall that was hiding them from the partying students beyond, until he was in the house’s shadow cast on the lawn by the moon. Jerry radioed to dispatch that he smelled marijuana coming from the house creating the disturbance. Dispatch told him to stay where he was. A team from the Illegal

Drug Task Force would be sent to the home. Jerry's job was to guard the fence, and arrest anyone who jumped over it attempting to escape the coming drug bust.

"Copy that," he said.

Fast listened to the radio traffic coming through his earpiece. Ten minutes later, he heard deputies confirm that blocking vehicles were in place at both ends of the street, and he waited anxiously as an assault van radioed it was in position in front of the house. A moment later, he heard a woman scream. His pulse quickening, Fast unholstered his 9mm pistol, flicked off its safety, and began raising the weapon upward to point it into the night sky.

"Sir," Deputy Fast said, noticing Bill as the gun—now horizontal—was aimed at the cinderblock wall. "You should wait inside the house. It's safer there."

"Son," Bill said. "This is my property, and I'm going to wait right here."

"All right, Sir," Fast said feeling the intensity of the moment rise within him. "Have it your way, but at least stand on the patio." Momentarily distracted, Jerry had forgotten to continue raising his pistol to point skyward as he watched Bill step toward the patio.

"Shit!" Bill said, as two male figures jumped over the cinderblock wall.