

CHAPTER 2

Witness To Murder

Jack saw the flashing red-and-blue lights of several vehicles. A kaleidoscope of light silently turning into the subdivision. The four coal-black cars with the yellow striping of the sheriff's department, and a large black van began the short trip from Baseline Road toward to the house of partying students. Each vehicle's flashing lights went dark upon entering the subdivision. Their white headlights went out as they neared their target. From his vantage point, Jack saw two of the cruisers peel off from the caravan, one blocking each end of a short section of the street where the students had parked their cars along both curbs; the van continuing forward to stop in front of the house. SWAT was painted in large white letters on the side of

the van. The paramilitary unit, dressed for war, emptied from of the van at a run in a quiet procession of deadly force, disappearing beneath the roof of the house whose backyard was aflame with merriment.

Jack listened to the loud crash of the front door, followed by a young woman's terrified scream. Instantly, the neighborhood lit up in a parade of red-and-blue flashing lights from the police vehicles. A black-uniformed SWAT deputy emerged from the house into the backyard, followed quickly by two more officers, each demanding at gun point that everyone exit the pool. Yelling at the students to lay facedown on the poolside concrete and the backyard lawn. At that same instant, two young men standing away from the group—not yet noticed by the deputies—bolted over the cinderblock wall and landed in the moonlit grass portion of Bill's backyard.

Jack heard the rapid pop, pop of gunfire. Frozen, he watched horrified as the two young men fell onto Bill's lawn. One moaning loudly, holding his abdomen, and rolling from side to side on the lawn. The other was immobile and silent. A scream erupted from inside of Bill's house. Bill dashed inside. Susan, Bill's wife, had witnessed the shooting too.

There was no reason to shoot those boys! Jack thought, lowering himself onto the deck to lie as flat as possible in case more shots were fired. Jack watched the sheriff's deputy holster his weapon and move rapidly to the two boys. The deputy kneeled

by the silent youth, reached into the pant leg of his uniform, and pulled a pistol from its ankle holster. He placed the weapon in the hand of the motionless young man, wrapping his lifeless fingers around the gun. Reaching for his shoulder microphone, the deputy spoke into it as he rose and walked away from the two fallen youths, again drawing his weapon. This time he kept it pointed to the ground as he stood alert to anyone else who might jump the fence to escape the melee across the wall, but no one else came. Sensing he was being watched, the deputy looked up at the balcony straight at Jack, but didn't seem to notice him. Unlike the police officer, who was backlit in the moonlight piercing between the two homes, Jack was invisible in the shadow of his balcony.

Jack pushed himself slowly backwards toward the sliding door to his office. When he neared it, he pushed the glass open with one hand and slid inside still on his stomach. Once in his office, Jack stood and quickly slid the door almost closed. He left it cracked a few inches, continuing to watch the activity below him.

The intensity of the raid dying down to routine arrests, Deputy Fast walked back to the young men again, this time his attention was focused on the one holding his stomach, moaning, and rocking back and forth on the lawn. The hair prickling on the back of his neck, Fast gave one final quick glance up at the balcony of the house next door. Someone *was* watching him. A

faint light backlit part of a silhouette standing just inside the sliding glass door, a computer's screensaver creating a rainbow of flashing color outlining the viewer's body. Then, the sliding door on the balcony slid closed, and the room went dark.

Fast knelt down, attempting to calm the youth, making a half-hearted attempt at first aid. However, Jerry was silently praying the young man would bleed out before the ambulance arrived. Even though his mind was all ready racing for answers to the questions sure to come, he knew dead men tell no tales. He also knew he needed to find out more about the balcony silhouette, but he would do that after his shift ended at six o'clock.

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"Damn it!" Jim said, dropping the pistol into his lap, his words echoing off the walls of the empty room. "That's the third time, Jimmy. Get some guts, man. You'll be dead in two months anyway, probably sooner. Now, do this thing!"

He began raising the pistol one more time, but stopped. The music at the party was gone. He heard a woman's scream, and then a kaleidoscope of red and blue danced through the window blinds across the living room walls.

"What the hell?" Jim said, standing and walking to a window at the front of the house. Splitting the narrow horizontal white-wood slats of the blinds with his forefinger and thumb, he saw the activity outside. "Just what I need," Jim mumbled. "A drug bust."

Then, two shots rang out. Without really thinking about it, Jim put his handgun back in the holster. There was a police raid outside with shots fired. Ending his life would have to wait. Walking to the SUV, he began monitoring his police radio. The shooting was a case of officer self-defense. When it became clear that his assistance wasn't needed, he walked back inside the house to watch and wait. The last thing the sheriff needed was to explain to the media why one of his deputies was in an fore-closed house in the middle of the night across the street from a drug bust.

The next hour was filled with the usual set of events. A small black sheriff's bus arrived to cart away partiers for drug testing, questioning, and booking. The flashing red-and-white lights of an ambulance came barreling past the front of the house, siren blaring, as it negotiated the array of police vehicles on its way to Banner Baywood Hospital four miles away. The black bus, filled with drunk, stoned, and confused young people, still in shock, rolled out of the subdivision toward the nearest police station six miles away on Dobson Road.

The police action was over. The SWAT team was the first to leave, always wanting to exit a premises before the media arrived. Soon, the other patrol cars left too. Jim looked down at his watch. It was five in the morning. He had spent the last couple of hours moving from one window to the next to get the best view of the activity, but all was quiet. Neighbors were com-

ing out of their homes and milling about, talking to one another, trying to understand what had happened.

I might as well get some rest, Jim thought. Hanging his suit jacket over the back of a folding metal chair in the living room, then removing his shoulder holster and gun, he laid on the plush living-room carpet in the middle of the empty floor. As he drifted off to sleep, he thought of the irony of taking a nap on the same floor that was to catch his falling dead body a few hours before. *God must have other plans for me*, he thought. Forgetting for the moment that he wasn't supposed to be alive when the letter in the mailbox reached its destination—Nathan at the Maricopa County Attorney's Office.

Jim was dreaming of hunting elk in the highlands of northern Arizona above Sedona. The beautiful red rock cliffs surrounded him as he walked through the forest. The smell of pine trees filled his nostrils with clean mountain air. In the distance, he saw the snow atop Flagstaff's San Francisco Peak through the trees. His world was silent, and in the silence was peace. Then, he heard an irritating noise. Someone had entered his sanctuary—and they had a cell phone.

Jarred from his sleep by the noise, Jim rolled onto his side to extract the phone from his jacket pocket. By the time he had it in hand, it stopped ringing with a "beep, beep". *Just as well*, he thought laying it on the carpet, rolling back onto his back, and staring at the scalloped design of the white-plaster ceiling. He

was tired. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock in the morning. He had been asleep for five hours, and he had the backache to prove it.

Jim rose from the floor, stretched, and straightened his suit pants. *Not too bad*, he thought, smoothing out the wrinkles. He put on his shoulder holster out of habit, and then walked into the kitchen for a cup of water to take his daily breakfast of pain medication. He heard the phone beep again behind him. The caller had left a voicemail.

Jim hated taking pills, but it was his life these days, such as it was—dying, one day at a time. After he took his morning dose of pills, he returned to the phone, dialed the voicemail, and listened. It was the sheriff's voice, "Jim, some kids had a party near the meeting house, and one of my deputies had to shoot two of them. I need you to go over to 637 Keats Avenue in Mesa and interview witnesses. I'll see you Monday."

Jim replaced the phone into its resting place in the inner pocket of his suit jacket. Then, he walked down the hallway toward the main bathroom. He was only a couple of blocks from that address, but he needed to freshen up before he interviewed witnesses.

He was drying his hands and face with sheets from the roll of paper towels on the countertop in the kitchen when the knife-sharp pain stabbed through his gut, taking his breath, and forcing him grab the countertop for balance. *I'm not going to be able*

to do anything this way, he thought as the pain slowly began to ease. He removed the prescription bottle from his pant's pocket. The label read, "Morphine Sulphate. Take one to two 15-milli-gram tablets as needed for pain." He had all ready taken two of the pills, but the pain was too intense this morning. He put two more of the tiny tablets into the palm of his hand, and downed them both with a cup of water. It was time to leave.

His mind was void of thoughts of suicide. He was a sheriff's deputy, performing his normal duties. Getting inside the SUV, he opened the garage door, backed out of the driveway, and headed toward Keats Avenue a block away.