

CHAPTER 1

Frank Smith stepped to one side at the top of the escalator, turned and studied the passengers behind him struggling with their luggage on the moving stairs. He inspected each in turn looking for tell-tale signs, for any indication that one or two might be following him. But they all seemed painfully normal. None appeared even remotely interested in him. He resumed his march toward the security check point. Sky Harbor, Phoenix's busy airport, teemed with men and women, many more than he would have expected on a Wednesday morning. He glanced backward once more and marginally increased his pace. He muttered to himself for his foolishness. If Ledezma or anyone else, for that matter, wanted to know where he was going, he would only have to step up and ask. Four years of suspicion and guilt had made him paranoid.

The whole idea was ridiculous, of course. No one chased anybody through airports anymore. No more O.J. Simpson careening through crowds to get to a plane on time. It was O.J. wasn't it? Time and circumstances changed so many things, memories dim, and O.J. has been reduced to the quintessential *persona non grata* in the civilized world.

He reached the security check point and joined the hundred or so men and women standing in the sixteen ranks of a serpentine line waiting for their turn to show an ID, a boarding pass, and be handed off to one of four screening stations. He had a brief Mel Brooks moment as he inched forward a few feet at a time—a movie scene, two men tearing through the airport, one in hot pursuit of the other. The first drew up at this slow moving line and stepped in. Then the other man joined it four or five places further back

and together they moved slowly forward, two feet at a time . . . shuffle, shuffle . . . shuffle, shuffle. Finally, the first cleared the x-ray and screening, and resumed his mad dash through the airport. The second, followed a moment later, hopping on one foot as he struggled to get his shoe on. He smiled and looked over his shoulder one last time.

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The plane was nearly full but he managed to get a window seat. He'd used his computer to print his boarding pass the night before and had made a point of being one of the first to board. He wanted to scrutinize the other passengers as they made their way between the seats, dragging their carry-on luggage down a cramped aisle scant inches too narrow to allow that to happen. A damp man in a rumpled suit squeezed into the seat next to him. He stowed his laptop and what appeared to be lunch under the seat in front of him. Frank squirmed around in his now more confined space. He wished he could have flown first class or at least business, but this trip did not qualify for a tax break and *Southwest* didn't offer first class seating anyway. He envied his row mate's foresight. He should have packed a meal. Now he would have to resign himself to a narrow seat, a bag of peanuts, and a snack pack. They'd dueled the for the best elbow position on the common armrest. During the course of this unacknowledged combat, his seatmate recognized Frank. The good news, he'd been awarded the best spot. The bad news, he had to engage in a conversation he'd sooner have avoided. The man turned toward him with a too familiar look.

"Let's say you're a murderer . . ." Frank flinched. ". . . How do you do it? I mean, I bet you must get that question all the time." For a split second, Frank wondered if it were possible this man had, in fact, followed him on the plane, if his question was more than idle curiosity. He decided to play it straight and see.

“I do, get the question that is. Well, in my opinion, murder, real murder, is ordinary and boring. Most of them are committed by desperate, angry, or demented people who’ve slipped out of control and are acting on impulse. Typically, they leave a trail a mile wide and they are almost always caught. The few who do get away with it are either lucky or someone or something interfered with the process. No, murder is pretty dull stuff.”

Frank knew better—knew that the vast numbers of murders were never solved, that in Los Angeles alone, the last time he looked, something like 8,000 murders were unsolved and the number grew daily. The process, as he’d called it, bogged down more often than not, because there were many more killers than there were homicide detectives to catch them. LA had more cops in its internal investigation unit than on the street as detectives.

“It’s means, motive, and opportunity,” he replied, trying to look deep and wise, and at the same time not appear pompous. “If I were plotting a killing, for example, I would find a way to mask all three and then do it. The last thing I want is for those characteristics to stick out and attract the notice of a detective. Otherwise, it’s ‘find them and book them’ . . . dull stuff.”

“That’s it?” His companion pushed back a pale lock of his comb-over and looked disappointed. “I mean, I would think anything as important as killing another human being, is pretty serious stuff and involve all sorts of—”

“No, that’s a common misunderstanding. In real life, murder is almost always mundane. It’s rarely planned, premeditated or thought out.”

“But in books . . . I mean, I read a lot of mysteries . . . yours for example, and the

murders are so elaborate and, well, elegant.”

“I don’t write about real life. I write fiction. You wouldn’t buy, much less read a book that accurately described most of the killings that cross a police blotter every day. Writers like me make up complicated and sometimes very shocking ones, serial killers, hatchet murderers, and the gorier the better. We describe autopsies with horrific precision. Don’t ask me why, but people seem to be fascinated with the graphic details of that process. Watch *CSI* some evening. Anyway, we’re in the entertainment business, not the truth business.”

“Oh. Well then, what if you had to solve a mystery? I mean with all the times you’ve written about them, I bet you could solve a real one. Do police departments ever ask you to?”

“Never.”

He did not mean to sound abrupt. This man could not possibly know what had happened and asked a perfectly reasonable question. Why wouldn’t people who studied and wrote about crime be good at unraveling them? Why indeed? Because writers solved their crimes backwards. They always knew who done it before they did it. He’d toyed with solving one once or twice, a long time ago, and thought he might like to again someday, but not today, not here, and certainly not under the present circumstances. He picked up the brochure from his lap and turned toward the window, hoping to signal an end to the conversation. The man looked crestfallen. He had a three by five card and a pen at the ready. Frank smiled and signed the card, *Best wishes, Meredith Smith*. The man nodded his thanks and left him to read his brochure.

He turned and stared out the window. The ground fell steadily away. In the early

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morning light, shadows etched the desert floor giving texture to shrubbery too far away to see clearly. Among the shadows he could make out longer ones, some branched, attached to thousands of saguaros which looked like Gumbys marching northward towards Sedona and Red Rock country. They would never make it. Fifty miles out I-17 they would come to an abrupt halt, their northward migration from Mexico stopped by temperature and altitude.

Soon the morning heat would send columns of air shimmering across the expanse below, distorting the shapes, tricking the eye into seeing things that weren't there. And somewhere down in that dead, brown, Arizona desert laid the bleached bones of his wife, missing now for four years and presumed dead. Another of those murders he'd so blandly dismissed moments before, one that went unsolved. No motive, no body, no suspects—except, of course, the most logical one, the one always favored by the police—him.

The plane leveled off, its engines settled into a low whine, and it turned its nose east toward Baltimore.