

Chapter 1 Accordion Pleats

John Russell Krupp liked this head of the homicide squad, Jerry Hocks, very much. Captain Hocks was quick on the uptake; John didn't have to explain something twice. In fact, the police chief, with whom he was now shaking hands, was just as smart. So, too, were the two detectives assigned to his project, a lieutenant, Joseph Rodriguez, and his partner, Thomas Flaherty, a cheery Irishman. Capt. Hocks had introduced the Hispanic-looking one as "Joe is the best there is outside the city limits. He can track salmon." The guy looked like any other detective in a sport coat and tie. But looks are constantly deceiving, John well knew. If anyone could pull off the impossible, it would be this team.

They had all exchanged business cards, smiles, and the basic civil niceties. John left the police station then and tried to unwind with a long, casual dinner at Bill Johnson's Big Apple, the recommended steakhouse. The interior was rough wood and beams, sort of bunkhouse-y, and the comely waitresses all ran around with .45 six-shooters holstered on their hips, their order pads and pencils stuck in behind the guns. That and the sawdust on the floor didn't make the food any better, but it was pretty good, their deep dish apple pie especially.

Approaching dusk he pointed his rental northward up the Black Canyon freeway. He would stay in Flagstaff that night. After church in the morning he would take Jake Milner to lunch and pick his brain. Milner always had good ideas.

Did these Phoenix cops realize the mortal danger into which they were stepping? Apparently so, but it didn't seem to bother them. On the other hand, homicide investigators were more or less accustomed to blood and guts.

The semi up ahead was going below the limit. John prepared to pass, but a panel truck pulled in beside him and dawdled there. His hackles went up. In this business, anything out of the ordinary always raised his hackles. He slowed in order to drop behind the panel truck. A big dump truck with a grader blade on the front had been more or less following him for the last five miles. A snowplow in southern Arizona in August? It belonged to the highway department, so they were probably spreading gravel somewhere. But why would it be out on a Saturday night? It now moved up, close behind him.

His hackles had been right; this looked and felt like an ambush. He needed out! Now! A sturdy steel three-foot-high guard rail to the right held him in. Trapped him. For a moment; only a split second; he panicked. This was a coordinated attempt on his life! He grabbed his mobile radio, thumbed the button and called in the license number of the truck ahead of him, the only plate he could see. He didn't get a chance to mention the dump truck behind; in his rearview mirror he saw it lower the blade. It rear-ended him, jerking his head back violently; he almost lost control of the wheel. He would have to shoulder that panel truck aside. He swerved left against the panel truck's fender. Its driver bobbed. He slammed into it again and the driver faltered; one more should do it. But the blade kept pushing on him, smashing his car into the back of the semi; John lost consciousness as his car was crumpling and his steering wheel was coming at him.

Joe studied the crushed car. It was more or less accordion-pleated into a wad of maroon and grey metal a third its original length. Somehow the wreck had been tossed up over the high guard rail

and down a steep slope. Yavapai County Sheriff's deputies wandered about with nothing to do, the light bars on their cruisers dancing wildly. The aid van folk from Flagstaff were standing around waiting to package the remains. They would be using Jaws of Life to get to some of it.

Beside him, Tommy said morosely, "This one's got to me, Jose. He was one sharp cookie."

"Yeah. I don't like when you just swapped business cards with your next victim."

To Joe's right, Jerry looked out across the gently rolling landscape with its yellow cheatgrass. They were near lower treeline and a few green blobs of piñon and juniper clung to the hills. "What do you see?"

"Murder, not accidental death. Perfect place for a hit. Not much traffic, the wreck isn't visible from the highway, and if it was getting dark or after dark, no one would notice."

"Aye. And well planned. We'll have them for premeditation when we find them."

Jerry nodded. "I like your 'when,' not 'if.'"

The Yavapai County incident commander stood beside Jerry. "I agree with you; this looks deliberate. You still want to take it?"

"I do. We have connections with the victim." Jerry sounded sad and weary, and it was eight AM.

Here came the forensics van and Doug Hakamura. As soon as they took their pictures, the Yavapai County aid crew could get to work. The deputies would still have nothing much to do except funnel traffic into the far left lane. Doug's crew photographed the scrapes and gouges in the steel guard rail. As the forensics folk climbed over it to go to work on the vehicle, Doug stepped in beside Jerry. Joe squatted down and ran his fingers along the gouges. "These are too deep for that car to have made them. The car's not heavy enough, and it's maroon. Whatever made them wasn't painted."

Doug nodded. "I agree. I see a lot of car versus guard rail. This isn't one."

Jerry looked grim. "There's a road crew on the Sutter ranch road, wherever that is. They're not working today, of course, it's Sunday morning. But I've asked the project manager to send us a front end loader and help us get the wreck back over on this side. The driver of the loader seems enthusiastic about the job, even if it's his day off."

"Tis not every day one gets to muscle rubbish about instead of rocks and gravel. And just wait until they learn they're being asked to manipulate a murder scene." Tommy's way with words tickled Joe, even on a somber occasion like this one.

Time crept by. Joe watched Doug's crew and marveled at how well they worked together, never duplicating efforts, but getting everything. Maybe it was just he, but they seemed happier now than when surly old Maynard Rust headed it up.

They and the Flagstaff crew worked together well, extricating and bagging the remains. Joe felt queasy.

"Eh, look. There he be." Tommy pointed out across the hill.

Now Joe could hear it, a huge caterpillar front end loader away out there, casually grinding along cross country. They were not dispatching it via roads. They had simply sent it west northwest across the rolling hillsides. Wouldn't that bad boy be a beast to drive, especially out here with no roads or tracks! Maybe Joe was in the wrong business.

Jerry got on his radio to talk to the driver, directly radio to radio, and got a scratchy response. He flipped to a repeater channel. Still no good contact.

Tommy checked his mobile phone. "Nae service." And he put it away.

A Yavapai County paramedic closed the doors and the aid van backed out.

And Krupp was off to the Phoenix morgue.

The incident commander watched it leave and gave Jerry his card. "We'd like to be kept in the loop on this one."

"Certainly." Jerry handed him his card.

Doug and crew had pretty much sampled the outside and now were working the inside. Joe climbed over the rail to get a closer look at the car. The front end had met with something that was probably painted white. He scraped some maroon paint off a mangled fender to ascertain the base coat. It was not white. The back end was totally squished, but not by anything that would leave paint streaks. He could not see telltale scuffs or anything.

The loader finally, belatedly arrived. Front end loaders are not known for speed. It must have been fun, though, bringing it waddling straight across country from its job site. Doug and crew were still working, so the driver turned off his machine and climbed down to join them. "How did you guys find it? It was clear over the side. You can't even see it from the pavement."

"A highway maintenance employee on his way to Flag saw the gouge marks in the rail and stopped to investigate." Jerry waved a hand. "It skidded about five hundred feet, apparently between two vehicles. But we have no idea how it went over the side. Have you any suggestions?"

The fellow frowned. "Nope. Sorry."

Doug's gang were starting to pack up, so the driver climbed back up into his seat. The diesel engine puffed a blob of black smoke and kicked in. Joe wondered idly if possibly some fine tuning could make it start cleaner. The driver pushed and pulled on levers. Skillfully he gathered scattered pieces into a pile, shoved the pile against the rail, and raised his bucket. With a loud crash the junk tumbled over the rail onto the road shoulder. Joe by now was seriously considering a career change.

The Yavapai incident commander had left when the aid van did. Jerry and the driver conversed a minute or two. Doug left. The loader left. Jerry left. One by one the deputies left, called away to other tragedies.

Joe and Tommy babysat the wreck until the wrecker arrived and winched the mess up onto his flatbed. Joe tried to ignore the dried blood. That wasn't working well at all. They helped toss spare pieces up and the driver secured them with a tarp and bungies. With pleasantries—he had not been here for the body removal or maybe he would not have been so pleasant—he continued up to the next exit to cross to southbound and return to Phoenix.

"Now what?" Tommy asked.

Joe snorted. "What do we always do? Go back and write it up." Tommy knew well how much Joe hated paperwork.

So they did.

Finally. Joe put the last touches on his report and sent it to the printer in the corner. He was done with his desk work and Krupp's ugly demise had really messed with him. Maybe he'd leave the office early and take the kids to the zoo. He needed some happy time. Besides, this was Sunday, technically his day off.

Or not. Here came their computer guru Henrietta Nieswonger through the door in her usual fluster. Ever since she became frightened of Y2K looming on the horizon, she flustered instantly at anything. And tailing behind her came an officer Joe recognized, Arthur Lunt.

"Captain Hocks." She barked.

Jerry appeared in his doorway. "Hello, Henrietta. What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry, but Homicide is seriously behind in transferring files to CDs. You know we must preserve those files, but none of you has turned in even one. Not one. So Sgt. Lunt here will work in Homicide to help you get caught up."

"Whoa! You're assigning your officer to my division?"

"I shouldn't have to. Other divisions are turning in CDs, so it can be done."

"And who is paying this person's wages?"

"His check will be covered by Homicide until the work is finished and all the back records are on CDs. Then I will trust your people to make copies of all your current and on-going investigations."

Jerry's brow puckered and his voice rose a little. "No, Henrietta, his paycheck will not be covered by Homicide, because I did not authorize him. You should know better than to try to assign personnel outside your division."

Sgt. Lunt spoke up. "Sir, codicil twenty-three does in fact allow that."

Jerry scowled at him. "Codicil twenty-three covers protocols during extreme emergencies, and this is not an ext—...".

"It certainly is!" Henrietta's eye twitched furiously. Joe happened to know that her eye only did that when she was anxious or upset. "Captain Hocks, you are not assigning this problem the importance it requires. We *must* have all the back records safe and undamaged when the millennium turns."

Joe's brain, however, was gathering up sheep from other pastures. "Uh, Jerry? When does Hugh Bartoli go in for that knee replacement?"

"Monday. Tomorrow."

"And he won't be able to drive, but I've heard you say we're hard-pressed to spare him for six weeks. I suggest Lunt here could come in handy, maybe."

You could see from Jerry's face that he too was doing some rapid sheep-gathering, even as Henrietta barked, "No! He is here to work on file transfers. He will not be your personal lackey."

Jerry's voice took on a smooth, velvet, iron-hard tone that Joe envied. "Henrietta, normally I would not countenance the sergeant's presence here in the division at all. We are specialized, we are elite, and you do not just become part of this division on someone's whim. Not even yours. I will make exception for this situation and this one only. But while he is here, he is under *my* command, not yours. Are we understood?"

"I don't..."

Jerry's voice softened. "We're on duty today because crime happens on weekends, but here you are working on Sunday, your scheduled day off. So I understand how important this matter is to you. I'm not blowing you off. Neither am I giving in on this point. If he works here, he will work on my terms."

Henrietta wilted a little. "I do wish I could impress upon you how important this is. Very well. But I insist you must give his work top priority." She waited for a response, got none, turned, and left.

Jerry crossed his arms and studied his newest employee. "So, Sergeant, tell me a little about yourself."

He wore plainclothes now, but the only other time Joe had seen Arthur Lunt, he was in dress blues and had ironed military creases into his shirt. For some reason, military creases put Joe off a little.

"I have been on the force fourteen years, sir," Lunt replied. "I started in Traffic, worked in Robbery several years, in Human Resources, and most lately in Motor Pool."

"I see. Well, welcome to Homicide. We'll expect you at work tomorrow at eight."

"Tomorrow at eight. Yes sir." The sergeant paused to study Joe a moment, then left.

Jerry didn't miss that. "You know that guy?"

"I probably got him fired from HR. They had him on Grim Reaper and he tried to pick a fight with me. I was the one who told Meghan Walters about Kyle's death, and he thought that was his job and I was stepping on his toes. He fumed and fussed at me and forgot all about Meghan. It's funny in a sad way; he wanted to write me up for interfering, but he didn't know my name. A couple days later I took Eddie Mancini out for a beer and we discussed him, among other things. Eddie agreed they needed a better Grim Reaper. Also, I learned that the Sun Devils were altering their football team a little."

Jerry half smiled. "Yeah, Eddie's big on the Sun Devils. Painfully so. It's been a pretty rotten morning. You and Tommy can kick back and come in tomorrow sometime, or not, if at all." And he returned to his office.

Tommy watched him go. "Ye know, Joe, we've ourselves a pretty sharp boss."

"We have indeed. You skipping school tomorrow?"

"Nae, most probably meself shall show up at the usual time."

"Me too, but it was nice of him to offer. I'm going to the zoo. You and Gretchen care to join us?"

"Until we got called out on the Krupp case this morning, she and I were going to look at properties in Sun City. Methinks we yet have time to do so. But I thank ye."

"Sun City! You're not old enough."

Tommy chuckled and stood up. "Since y'rself and I be about the same age, I can see y'r concern. Vested interest, as it were. Investment properties, not domiciles."

"Whew. That's a relief. Enjoy what's left of the day."

As if anyone could enjoy the rest of this day.

Krupp