

CHAPTER ONE

THE SANTA ANA winds are dry and warm - sometimes hot – winds that affect coastal Southern California and northern Baja California from September to March. In fact, they range from hot to cold, depending on the temperatures in the region of origin, namely the Great Basin, which stretches from the Sierra Nevada range in the west to the Wasatch Range in Utah, and Northern Mexico up to Oregon, and the upper Mojave Desert.

The air from the Mojave Desert is relatively dense owing to its coolness and aridity, and tends to channel down the valleys and canyons in gusts which can attain hurricane force at times. As the air descends, it not only becomes drier, but warmer. The southern California coastal region gets some of its hottest weather of the year when the Santa Anas are blowing. At these times it is more often than not hotter along the coast than in the deserts.

Tonight was no exception. A warm and dry blast of air blew down the mountain passes. Warm and dry, and easily exceeding 40 mph, they brought with them a thin layer of reddish dust. They were hot too: the Santa Monica weather station's instruments were recording 98 degrees.

The man staggered along the empty road. Dressed only in torn white shorts, he weaved back and forth across the yellow centre line. He could make out some kind of reflection on the wet road below. He felt down and rubbed his leg. There were scratch marks down to his ankle from the tumble he had taken down the hillside from above. He stopped and looked round, disorientated, blinking.

Where was he?

Somewhere high up, he was sure; he could hear, or thought he could hear, the muffled rumbling of traffic below.

But where exactly?

And how did he get here?

He stopped and looked around. He could make out lights above and below, but the road he was on was devoid of any buildings. It was only the light from the moon which gave him any form of illumination.

There was mist around: as the road disappeared round a bend ahead, and behind as it receded into the dark.

He felt cold, even though the strong winds blowing down the hillside were hot. He wiped the dust from his eyes and continued along the road.

He needed to find shelter, some help.

After a few more yards' shuffling, he stopped again. A dog was barking. He looked around, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from. A dog would mean someone's house.

The barking seemed to be coming from below. Maybe the lights below were from a house. That meant a phone.

A phone. He could remember using a cell phone earlier that evening. Could remember putting the phone back onto the belt clip he used. Involuntarily, he felt down to his waist. All he could feel was the

elastic of his torn, dirty shorts.

Where were his clothes? How did he end up here?

He started to walk again, this time towards where he thought the barking, which had now stopped, came from. He rubbed the side of his leg and looked at his hand. Blood. Then looked at his leg. The scratches were bleeding more; not profusely, but they would need attention.

He veered over to the right hand side of the road, so now he was walking partly on the road, partly on the bumpy verge.

He paused as he could make out a new source of light. They got closer. Two small separate lights, slightly diffused in the mist. Then the sound of a car engine.

By now he could make out the vehicle as it came round the bend. It was not coming at him very fast, no doubt because of the mist, which seemed to thicken as the road went downhill. He staggered over to the centre of the road as the car came round the bend. Feebly, he waved his arms in the air. The driver braked, and the car skidded slightly as it came to a halt around ten feet past the man. He ran up to the driver's door. A grey haired man was driving, with a woman of similar age sitting in front with him. The driver wound down his window.

'What in hell's going on?' the driver asked. 'I could have...' He stopped as he noticed the figure was wearing only shorts. 'Jesus H!' he exclaimed.

'Please, I need help...' The man rested his hand on the car roof and leaned over.

'Look, I'm sorry, I....'

'Can I borrow your cell phone? I need to make a call.'

The woman leaned forward and saw him. 'Tell him to go away, Gus.'

Gus looked over at her and back at the man. 'I – I, er...'

'Please, mister. Go away. You're scaring us,' the woman said.

'I just need a cell phone for a minute...'

'Sorry, pal,' said Gus as he wound up the window. 'We don't want any trouble.'

'But I just...'

Gus wound up the window and the car sped away into the darkness and into the mist.

He watched as the red tail lights faded away into the mist. After a few moments' pause, he continued to shuffle on. He cried out as he stepped on something sharp. He lifted up his leg and pulled out a sharp stone which had gotten embedded in the sole of his bare foot. Then moved on again.

Looking down, he could make out some lights. Maybe that was where the barking was coming from. This was the direction from which he could still hear the rumble of traffic.

He slowly stepped off the road and began to climb down the slope. It was steep in places but he was able to grab onto some bushes for support. As he climbed further down, the undergrowth became thicker. He tried to make out what the vegetation was. The smell seemed familiar: maybe buckbush. As he got further down, he realised he had lost sight of the lights. He panicked slightly as he lost his bearings. Looked around again. No sign of any lights now, but the ambient sound of the traffic below was still there.

He moved on again.

After twenty yards or so, the traffic noise was getting louder. Perhaps he should head for there; on a busy road he would stand a better chance of flagging someone down.

Then he missed his footing. Tried to grab a bush for support, but missed. Landing on his back, he slid down the slope. He cried out as his back was lacerated by the shrubs and rocks as he skimmed over them. He hit an obstruction, a tree stump maybe; rather than stopping his descent, it served to knock him sideways so now he was rolling down. He tried to put his hands in front of him to protect his face, but his momentum was too great. As he rolled down, one side of his head hit some hard ground. Just then, his fall stopped.

He lay there, dazed. He thought he had reached the end of the drop as he was now lying on level ground. He felt up to his temple: it was wet and sticky. His vision was blurred. He stood up and moved on. Suddenly under his feet he could feel not ground and brush, but a smooth surface. Not unlike the road above. Still disorientated he staggered forward.

His last sensations were a blinding white light, a loud, deep blare. Then, a microsecond of intense pain as something weighing 35000 lbs slammed into him.

Then nothing.

