

PROLOGUE

There was a bridge. Narrow. Narrower than the anemic, winding road that led down to it from the slopes on either side of the canyon, a deep gash knifing through dry hills that on this moonless night were mottled with the shadowy forms of boulders and cacti, an army of silent desert sentinels. The bridge was old, cobbled out of crumbling gray cement and volcanic rock the color of dried blood. Its pavement was cracked and pebbly with wear and neglect. Gleaming glass shards littered the roadbed and the edges of the cliff, mirroring millions of stars that glittered overhead in a bottomless black sky.

The tiny night sounds of scurrying rodents and the predators that hunt them were suddenly obscured by the rumble of two cars approaching the bridge from the south. One produced a thin, strained whine. The other a more powerful noise, low and angry. With a resounding roar the larger vehicle gained ground on the smaller one and drew alongside it as they both neared the precipice. There was a pause, followed by a volley of explosions, metal and glass blasting through the chasm, the sound screaming up the mountainsides, rocking boulders loose, shaking cacti to their roots, startling sleep-drugged birds into shaky flight. In a cacophony of destruction, metal and rock clashed against each other time and again, as one of the vehicles bounded and tumbled into the barranca's depths, pursued by a shower of loosened stones and fractured glass, until at last it rocked to a halt in the dry stream

bed hundreds of feet below the bridge. A cloud of dust and smoke billowed out of the gorge, veiling the faint blue starlight.

A low animal sound, eerie and unearthly, feeble at first, gathered strength and rebounded through the canyon, in whose depths, where the vehicle lay crumpled and steaming, a light wind swirled like the stir of batwings. A rustle in the clumps of dried grass that lined the arroyo. A humid gust of breath, a wind whisper that shuddered up the canyon walls through the brush, ruffling the fur of tiny frightened animals crouched in its shadows. Higher and higher it rose, up over the bridge, over the mountains into the black void beyond.

Then the creak and ping of cooling metal in the ravine's depths, the whoo of a lone owl, and the light retreating step of a coyote that had watched it all from a craggy overhang.