



The Death Maze

Richard Parnes

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By

Richard Parnes



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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507
Houston, TX 77065
www.sbpra.com

ISBN: 978-1-63135-538-7

Book I—The Death Maze

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Mila.
Her love, devotion, and belief in my dreams kept me pointed in the right direction.

Prologue

There was a mist hanging in the room. It seemed to be standing, as if planted, without a trace of movement. If one were to try to touch it, it would recoil as if bending. Even though it would never allow this to occur, the mist did not have life.

There were no lights, yet there appeared to be an illumination, a sparkle that also hung without a beginning or an end. The light also seemed to bend in order to avoid any contact with the unknown. It too could recoil and also did not have life.

If this was the castle high above the cliffs, separated from an entire village, then this was the eeriness that attracted no one near its doors. If one were to say that it was the master and it controlled all that it inhabited, this statement would not be correct. It all came and went without a means and without an origin.

A strange, unaccounted wind arrived, blowing the mist toward one wall. It naturally bounced off the wall and then took up its original stance. It was a wind without a window, or some means of ventilation, to cause some change in the air, a mist without a sky to create it, and a sparkle without the serendipity of the origin: a gift.

This was the unknown, where no human had ever been.

Chapter 1

The sun was shining as bright as it could at one in the afternoon when they left Lake Havasu City, Arizona. It would only be a couple hours before Ed and Ruth Putnam would arrive at their new home and new life. They had started out in Miami, Florida, a little less than a week prior and were taking their time to reach their new home. Highway 95 was clear before the transition to I-40. I-40 was very smooth to the California border, with no signs of any hazards along the way. The gas tank was full and they knew they would not have to stop before they arrived in front of the home they had bought as an investment a couple years earlier and would use for their home-based retail business. The small U-Haul was evenly loaded and everything was set. Money was in the bank, the house was ready for them to move in, and their lives were destined for nothing but positive, uplifting changes.

Once they crossed into California and passed the border town of Needles, only twenty to thirty minutes passed before they saw the sign that said ARIONE NEXT RIGHT. Arione was perfectly situated just south of the Mojave National Preserve, with Laughlin, Nevada, to the northeast, Lake Havasu City, Arizona, to the east, and Palm Springs to the south. It had easy access to many places, and though it was out in nowhere-land, their practical and everyday needs could be met close by.

They saw two more signs before they exited the interstate and turned onto the main road leading to town. The first of the two signs was faded, and this made Ruth uncomfortable. She had remembered this sign as being small but vibrant and eye-opening. The second of the two signs was new and just said the name of the town, Arione, which was now only three miles away. The glare from the sun reflected off the windshield, and Ed lowered the visor to assist his vision. It really didn't help, as the brightness of the setting autumn sun stung his eyes even through his sunglasses. The road was a narrow two-lane stretch into Arione's town limits and was in desperate need of widening and new line painting.

In the distance, at the local Gas and Mini Mart, the engine of a huge eighteen-wheel gas tanker started. The driver revved the engine as he prepared to leave the station. He had filled the tanks and his next stop was the town of Vera, only a few miles down the interstate.

Won't take more than an hour, the driver thought. He couldn't wait to get home to his very horny girlfriend, who would do anything he wanted as long as he brought home enough bacon to keep her happy. "Oh, yeah," he called out. "Getting some more tonight!" He thought about calling her and telling her to get dinner ready. However, the radio was turned up high, and Brooks & Dunn's "Boot Scootin' Boogie" got him going as a karaoke-singing machine.

He began to pick up speed as he swerved on the two-lane road, totally ignoring the double yellow line. "Oh, heel toe do-si-do, come on baby let's go, boot scootin'," he blared out. He passed a NO PASSING sign, reached for the half-open can of beer in the console, and took a long drink. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and put the can back in its rightful

place. “Get down, turn around, go to town, boot scootin’ boogie!” he bellowed as he looked at his watch one more time and hit the gas pedal, wanting to reach for another gulp.

The glare was still a problem for Ed, as he and Ruth were traveling in a southwest direction toward Arione. Their new home was only a few miles away by rural standards, and time was really of no concern out in the boondocks. They could see part of the interstate and a few cars in the distance but could barely see the road in front of them. *Slow down, Ed*, he thought to himself. *What’s the rush?* He looked at his beautiful wife, smiled, and quickly brought his eyes back to the road.

It was too late. One quick look and a smile was all that was needed. The glare slid off the windshield and Ed saw that the large truck was out of control. He couldn’t even steer out of the way. The truck’s driver didn’t even try to turn the wheel. Ruth let out a terrifying scream and grabbed hold of the door handle. “Ed!” she screamed.

Ed didn’t even respond. His eyes bulged out of his head as Ruth pulled up on the door handle. Her door opened wide. Ed turned the car to the right to spare Ruth’s side of the car from a direct collision. When the two vehicles did collide, the driver’s side of the car took the worst of the impact. The door crushed into Ed as he bounced to the side and back toward the seat. His hands still firmly on the steering wheel, he jerked back again as the wheel broke from the dash and lodged into his skull. For Ed, death came quickly.

The truck continued transforming the car into an accordion. The car and U-Haul, now on their sides, quickly balanced on the wide-open passenger door and folded the door into three pieces. Ruth screamed again

and hit her head on the dashboard before bouncing back against her seat. The car then rolled again, breaking the ball connection to the U-Haul. The driver of the truck grabbed his wheel and quickly turned to the right. The car rolled again, away from the truck, as the truck jackknifed and began to tip over. After one more roll, the car, with Ruth still in it, rested upside-down next to the U-Haul trailer.

The driver of the truck tried to undo his seat belt and open his door before the truck overturned. He was too slow. The beer had already clouded his brain. Brooks & Dunn were just finishing the song when the gas in the tank of the truck exploded and caught him as he tried to scream for help. Later, when they pulled his charred body out, his mouth was wide open. After the gas tank exploded, fumes from the fire began to burst toward the hundreds of gallons of gasoline spilling into the bed of the truck.

Then the silence of the late afternoon in the desert shattered.

Some residents in the town of Arione thought it was an earthquake. Others thought they'd gone deaf. Windows of a half-dozen homes cracked into pieces, and car alarms sang in unison. Dogs barked and howled because their ears were hurting from the noise. A man who owned a couple horses heard the back fence break and saw the horses run into the desert.

The burst of flames quickly engulfed the truck and billowed into the sky. With a soft wind blowing, the mushroom cloud, now gray and black with a devil's smile, eagerly swallowed the clean afternoon air. The entire northeast section of Arione grew uneasily dark. One resident later said that it jolted and scared him so badly he wet his pants and prayed it was not

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the end of time. A second swore he saw the desert split open, as if the San Andreas Fault had separated California from Arizona. A third said he thought he saw Satan take a huge bite out of God.

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