

A filthy mixture of snow, ice, Arkansas mud and blood filled my mouth - the gritty mess was making it almost impossible to breathe. Eyes still closed, and trying not to choke, I rolled my head to the left and spit the nauseating mixture onto the bright snow. Apparently my nose was broken, because after relieving my mouth of the irritation, it quickly filled with the warm and sweet taste of blood – my blood. Oddly, despite the trauma of the last few minutes, my thoughts and head were remarkably clear – making me wonder if I might be in the early stages of shock. I'd never been there before.

Silence was everywhere, only disturbed by the sound of light snow falling, and thankfully covering my dry lips. I licked at the welcome moisture and slowly opened my eyes, not knowing what I might see.

A fuzzy gray sky, white falling snow and fading daylight stared back at me - looking down at where I lay - in a dirty, wet ditch, somewhere in Arkansas.

The human body is a smart and complex machine. When any of the five senses aren't working properly, it directs another to pick up the slack. Without sound or vision, my suffering nose was receiving input about my current situation and relaying that information to the brain, it didn't like what it was hearing! The smells of burning rubber, radiator fluid, raw gasoline and the heat associated with a crashed car engine were reminding me of why I was in this ditch and why my mouth was full of blood. The real world was coming back and it wasn't pretty!

Our getaway was cut short by the wrong turn down a dead end road, but pursuers had left us no choice. The dark, snowy, lonely roads of rural Arkansas weren't familiar to the driver, and what seemed like the perfect opportunity for escape, quickly turned into disaster.

Straining to add vision to the messages from my nose, I looked to my right and confirmed what I already knew. The car was resting nose down in the ditch and only a few feet from where I lay. Steam rose from a broken radiator, and its warm fluids dripped onto the snow; then the melted mess found its way to the bottom of the filthy trench I was in.

The engine stopped running with impact, but somehow bent and crushed headlights remained on - dimly shining against the ditch bank and tall grass. Light reflecting back on the destroyed car, painted a surreal and bizarre picture for my weak eyes.

An open passenger door was the reason I was in this ditch, and my ejection spared me most of the shock from the crash. I knew my nose was broken, and I certainly had other injured parts not

discovered; but I was alive – for now. Somehow I'd managed to avoid the bullets, and only escaped the violent collision by choosing the peril of jumping from a moving vehicle. Unfortunately the driver wasn't that lucky.

The head and face made a perfect imprint in the smashed windshield - open and lifeless eyes staring at me through the bloody glass and asking for help. I had none to offer. Impact from the sudden stop against the ditch bank was enormous - however, I don't suspect the body felt a thing. Moments before running out of road, a bullet crashed through the driver's side window; taking most of their head with it, before slamming into the dashboard.

Even knowing it was useless, instinct told me to get up...get up and go check on my friend, the one I had promised to protect. Whoever fired the bullet that removed most of my friend's head was probably only a few yards away and already rushing over to finish their work.

Unfortunately, my .38 wasn't in its holster where it belonged – I knew that. During the short and speedy chase I had managed to fire two rounds at our pursuer, neither one having much effect on their aggressiveness. The gun was in my hand when I left the vehicle, but it wasn't there now – apparently separating itself from me somewhere in the process.

Weapon or no weapon, I needed to get out of this ditch and on my feet – stand up to run or stand up to fight. Either way, I needed to stand up!

Putting my right arm against the soft ground, I rose slightly before moving my left – the pain was deafening! I slumped back into the mud, cursing myself for letting this happen. My left arm was useless, either broken when I left the vehicle or from another bullet that I never felt.

Looking away from the carnage I closed my eyes to help tolerate the pain and tried to recall recent events. Events that led me to a 'one horse' town in Arkansas, events that had killed my friend and events that put me in this dirty snow filled ditch without the ability to get out.

It started only a few days ago, which now seemed like forever. A client I was hired to protect - a simple task – had gone badly. Now, I have a dead friend, a dead client and a task not so simple.