

# Superstition Victim

ELLEN BEHRENS





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A Rollin RV Mystery

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Cover image taken in the Lost Dutchman State Park in Arizona by Ellen Behrens. All rights reserved.

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First Edition

For my husband Robert Craig, who has always known the power of  
intuition conquers everything—especially superstitions.



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**Superstition**

**Victim**

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## Chapter One

Recreational vehicle salesmen rank pretty low on my list of people I enjoy spending my time with—they're in the general "salespeople" category which includes those who push insurance and cell phone coverage plans, even some shoe store employees. They fray my last nerve, but they are a teensy bit better than those who need to out-do everything you say. You've met them: You make a remark about hiking in the Grand Canyon, and they've gone Rim-to-Rim—in a day (yeah, right).

Of course, despite an early hike that had refreshed us in the way only outdoor exercise can, we were suffering under the rotten luck of finding the one RV salesman who also relished one-upping us. In that usual back-and-forth patter of getting to know us enough to assess our needs, Bradley managed to mention his half-million-dollar Class A

motorhome, his Rolex watch, his Bentley, and the fact that he could be retired at the ripe old age of thirty-eight except he knew he'd be bored and would miss meeting lovely people like Walt and me. We could see through him, of course, but he was oblivious to the fact that we were unimpressed—or he didn't care.

Unfortunately, he was the one available salesman on the lot at RVs With Perks (what a name, huh?). Clearly one of the perks of the dealership was not a stable of amiable salespeople. Our luck to have gotten Bradley not just the first time we set foot on the lot, but on this return trip as well. Maybe somewhere on our drive a black cat had crossed our path.

We weren't giving up our fifth wheel; we'd just found the big rig limited how we could travel, where we could stay, when we could re-fuel the diesel truck that pulled it.... Something smaller, something easier to navigate through heavy traffic, something that would fit into more parking areas was calling to us. But the fifth wheel had become home to us, so we were planning to keep it, to park it at an RV resort in southern California on a long-term lease, visiting there during the harshest months of winter (which weren't very harsh, not this far south).

Late May in Phoenix is already hot, and the interior of the used Class A where we sat chatting was heating up. We'd seen plenty of RVs in the last two days and were already getting burned out. There are only so many ways 400 square feet of living space—or less, for smaller RVs—can be laid out without repeating a few tried-and-true designs.

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Or maybe Bradley himself was getting to me.

“So what about this one?” he asked, gesturing around the worn interior with his fake Rolex. “Gently used, low miles, drives as easy as your truck. Sign today and I’ll knock another few thou off the cost.”

I’d already taken a close look, had already seen the frayed fabric on the lumpy hide-a-bed loveseat and the brownish stains in the shower. I’d pulled a kitchen cabinet door open only to have the knob fall into my palm. Gently used? More like plenty used. We were not looking for a fixer-upper RV. It might have had low miles, but that only meant it had to have been sitting someplace for long periods of time—which could mean hidden problems lurked.

Bradley rummaged in his pocket, leaning to one side in the dinette bench seat to fish out his cell phone. He twitched his thumb across the face of his phone, climbing out of the booth at the same time. “Be right back.”

Walt and I looked at each other and shrugged. If Bradley could escape the sweaty confines of the RV, we could too.

A cool breeze caught us as we climbed down the steps onto the asphalt lot. Bradley had wandered down the row of used motorhomes and fifth wheels and was pointing toward one of them as if the person on the phone could see it.

“Well?” Walt nodded toward the RV we’d just been in.

I already knew Walt couldn't see himself driving anything that resembled a bus. We'd considered that option back when we bought the fifth wheel, and the only thing that had changed since was that he was probably even more sure he never wanted to drive one.

I made a face. I uttered a "yech" sound. Even if he'd been willing to drive it, I hated it. I'm usually not picky about aesthetics, never having chosen a car because of its interior-exterior color palette or whether its seats heated up or not. But this RV's pale pink (or maybe faded red) interior accents and dull gray walls, its threadbare carpets and sagging mattress all left me wondering about the previous owners, who I guessed were retirees like me and Walt, the only thing that might have made Bradley think we would have liked this unit.

"Even with a small Class A, by the time we hook up a tow vehicle," I said, "our total length will be close to what we have with the fifth wheel."

"And we're back to where we started," Walt added. Finding places to park. Looking for the right gas station to be sure we could squeeze in, hoping they had a diesel pump.

A Class C on the next aisle caught my eye. Unlike the Class A, which is built like a bus, a Class C has a front-end like a truck with the living quarters in the back. "Let's look at that one," I said, heading toward it.

I wasn't entirely sold on the idea of a used unit—we're allergic to cats, dogs, and cigarette smoke, which rules out most RVs because

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most RVers own pets and many smoke. But we'd had trouble with our brand new fifth wheel as soon as we drove it off the lot, and we'd heard new units were even worse these days. Being recalled for things like (can you imagine?) axles that were installed backwards, faulty fuel lines running too close to propane tanks, and propane tank trays inadequately mounted causing tanks to fall during travel were just a few of the nightmares we'd read about.

The choices weren't good, but we were going to have to make one if we wanted to stay on the road, visiting all the places we still wanted to see, and returning to spots we'd already fallen in love with.

I stepped up the metal stairs into the Class C. It reminded me of a tiny studio apartment I'd once had—living, sleeping and preparing meals all in one tiny, efficient space. How anything could be smaller than our fifth wheel yet so cozy had been beyond my imagination, yet here it was.

“Oh! So here's where you went.” Bradley hopped up the steps into the coach. He pushed his fists into his hips and looked from Walt to me and back, as if trying to make a decision, then flung himself onto the loveseat. “Thought you were ready to pull the trigger on the Class A,” he said, pointing vaguely out the window. He looked at his phone again, made a few clicks and swipes, and then sighed heavily. “Just what are you looking for, anyway?”

We'd already told him. We wanted something small and maneuverable while still being comfortable. Something built well

enough to take the miles and the many months we were planning to keep it through.

“We don’t exactly know yet,” Walt said. It had worked for us with the fifth wheel—only after looking and looking at dozens and dozens of different RVs did we settle on the one we called our mothership, and we still liked it. Except it was big. It was a living-in RV, not so much a traveling-in rig.

“We’ll know it when we see it,” I added. It was the mantra Walt and I followed, and it seemed to work for most everything.

Bradley jumped to his feet as if he’d been stung. “How can I help if you don’t know what you want? This is the second time you’ve been here. I’ve shown you—” he sputtered here, probably trying to count up in his head the three RVs we’d toured that morning and remember what he’d shown us the day before—“plenty of possibilities, all within a great price range, units I can make you a great deal on—”

“It’s not about the money,” Walt said. “We’ll pay a fair price for the unit we want. We just want to make sure it’s the right one.”

“But you just told me you don’t know what the right one is!”

We nodded. That must have infuriated him. He took the one step over to the door and motioned for us to leave. “Get out,” he said. “Get out of here. If you’re not ready to really have a conversation, you’re wasting my time.”

“But—” It was my turn to stutter and stammer. I thought we *were* having a conversation.

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“Get the hell off my lot!”

His RV lot? I didn’t believe that for a second.

“Get out of here! Leave!” His face was red, his hands in fists. He pressed his lips together as if afraid something worse might come spewing out. I started shaking. No salesperson had ever spoken to me that way before. How dare he!

“Come on,” Walt said, guiding me down the steps. I knew if I was fuming, Walt had to be using every last muscle in his sixty-five year-old body to keep from exploding. He’d been working at keeping his temper, but this was testing his limit.

We got down the three steps onto the asphalt lot. I could hear Bradley yelling at us from the Class C. “Just get the hell out of here! And don’t come back!”

We didn’t even think about asking for a manager, we just got in our one-ton dually pick-up truck and drove off the dealership lot. He didn’t have to worry—we had no plans to go back there.

If only it had been that simple.

## **Chapter Two**

“I’m shaking,” I said, staring at my hands. I didn’t know how Walt was able to stay calm enough to maneuver us through the hectic traffic.

Cities weren’t our favorite places to spend time; we’d only been putting up with the craziness of Phoenix and its environs to hunt down the perfect RV for the rest of our travels. If Bradley didn’t want to help us find the ideal travel rig, we’d find a salesman who did. And there were plenty of other dealerships in this metropolis.

Walt reached across the center console to give my fingers a quick squeeze before returning his hand to the steering wheel. Both hands, full attention, even when we weren’t driving the full rig. I focused

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on the GPS, helping Walt navigate the traffic and routes out of town toward the state park where our fifth wheel home sat waiting.

Despite the distractions, the deep breaths I kept taking, and the easy jazz CD playing, I was still shaking when we pulled into the state park outside Apache Junction. The hot spring sun pierced the windshield, firing into my face like a bullet. I tugged the visor on my ball cap lower, shielding myself as best I could from a potential headache. Bright sun, a change in elevation, local allergens... all kinds of possible causes, but the last thing I wanted was a booming, bashing migraine. Bradley's outburst hadn't helped one iota.

Few other RVs populated the park. While the rest of the country relished the last days of spring, here in central Arizona it was deep summer. I was glad we'd squeezed a hike in when the day was cooler and kinder.

Maybe to erase the image of Bradley's angry face, I thought of the Asian-American couple we'd met along the trail that morning, their steps light and agile, though they looked to be about our age. "Any rattlesnakes?" Walt had asked.

They paused, smiling, and shook their heads. "Not on this trail," the woman said, a perky grin on her face. She pointed past the peak on our left and named another trail. "We saw one on that trail. I went like this—EEEEK! and the snake went same—EE! We surprise each other."

Maybe we had just surprised Bradley. Maybe he hadn't been expecting customers unwilling to sign the bottom line so quickly. Maybe he was the one who'd had a black cat run across his path.

I rubbed my forehead, pressing against a dull throb called "stress."

"New neighbors," Walt said as we neared our site.

The park was set up, as many are, in a winding, broad loop with individual RV sites extending like short branches from the main lane for back-in sites, while others formed little side-loops for pull-through sites. Ours was a pull-through site, easier for parking the big rig. It also gave us a side view of the main road through the park and the occasional shine of headlights beyond the night shades when someone came in late, which at least one other RV had done last night. Why arrive so late? Maybe some people have so little time to enjoy their RV they have to load up after work and make the drive from wherever they're escaping.

Why they seemed to pick spots close to ours when so many others were open was the real mystery.

Another new neighbor had come in across the road from us while we were at the RV dealership. A small Class C, smaller than the one we'd seen at the dealership, sat at an odd angle in the pull-through site, as if someone had a hard time lining up the driver's side with the power pedestal. I would have expected this from someone coming in late at night, not someone coming in with the full flush of sunlight to guide them.

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A woman about my age came around the side of the rig, holding a tiny dog in her arms, white hair matching her dog's fur stuck out like a fan around her head. She bent her petite body to pull open a lower storage compartment while the dog struggled to break free from her grip. When it saw us, it started barking.

Great.

I took deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. An afternoon nap started calling to me. Sometimes the best way to spend a hot afternoon was to stretch out on the bed, aim the air conditioning vents on us, and imagine we were relaxing next to the cool breeze of the ocean. Come to think of it, maybe that's what we should do, I thought: pull up stakes and head for the coast. Shop for an RV somewhere else. But there were complicated out-of-state purchaser reasons why we'd decided to buy a rig here. And starting all over somewhere else didn't mean we'd have any better luck with salesmen, right?

Walt parked the truck in front of the fifth wheel and we crawled down from the big dually into heat that hit us like a furnace blast. I could hear the air conditioner running in the RV (it would run all day, every day, as long as we were here). No opening the door, no feeling close to nature unless we got up before dawn—again.

“Excuse me! Excuse me!”

It was the woman across the street. Waving her free arm as if flagging a cab, ignoring her barking dog, she trotted across the street toward us. Her short white hair bobbed wildly and her sunglasses slipped down her nose with every step she took. She wore what I'd decided must

have been some female version of an RVer uniform: capri pants and short-sleeved denim shirt over a pale tee shirt in a matching design outlined in multi-colored rhinestones. I'd seen many designs—this one with exploding fireworks was particularly popular. I wondered about that denim shirt in this heat.

I held up a hand to stop her. "Please don't come closer. We're allergic to dogs."

She stopped in her tracks. "Oh. Sorry." She looked at her dog as if surprised anyone could resist her fur baby. It took her a second or two to collect her thoughts. "I just wondered if you could help me get my water hooked up. I'm really new at this, and I haven't quite got the routine figured out yet."

I looked at Walt. He shrugged. Every RVer was a newbie at one point, and we certainly were no exception (our first trip was so disastrous it's a wonder we kept at it... but that's a story for another time).

"I'll put Poopsie inside," she said, her eyes wide and worried and pleading.

"Deal," Walt said, unable to resist the urge to help someone in need.

The woman scrambled to unlock her door and scoot the little dog inside. Walt gave my shoulder a squeeze. "You should get inside where it's cool. I'll be right there."

I went around our own rig, turned the water on, then circled back to the front to unlock the door. Across the lane, Walt was untangling a

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long water hose, checking the ends of it. I could hear him tell the woman how important it is to protect the ends of the water hose or risk contamination. “We just put little plastic baggies on them,” he told her.

She nodded as if she understood, but something told me she was so overwhelmed by what she’d gotten herself into that she’d already heard this, had already forgotten it, and was about to forget it again.

I unlocked the top and bottom locks and leaned back to pull open the door (exterior RV doors always open outward—saves interior space that way). A gush of cool air-conditioned relief washed over me. I hopped up the steps and into the rig, pulling the door closed behind me, all as fast as I could manage to move my just-past middle-aged butt. I dropped the few brochures of new RV models onto my cubbyhole desktop then crossed to the loveseat. We’d covered most of the windows to keep the hot sun from turning the rig into an oven, but a gap we’d left open was enough to spy on Walt and the neighbor lady.

Her small Class C was positioned with her front door on our side, the electrical pedestal and water connection on the opposite side, out of my sight. She’d left her door open, and her little dog was barking as if possessed, hopping and jumping against the screen. She really needed one of those screen braces I’d seen in other rigs—I’d try to remember to suggest one. Otherwise her little pooch was liable to plunge right through that thin wire mesh.

Something in me said I should go help, but I knew I’d only be in the way, adding confusion to the clear instructions Walt was no doubt providing. He’d at least give her better guidance than we ever got. I

sighed. Maybe it was because we were shopping for another RV that I kept thinking of what we'd gone through buying the one I was sitting in. I shook those thoughts away.

In the years we'd been full-time RVing I'd learned to distinguish between "campgrounds" and "RV parks" (you can't always believe descriptions in online or printed camping guides): campgrounds might allow for RVs, with some larger parking spaces and maybe a way to hook up a utility or two, but they're mostly designed for campers—folks toting tents or driving camping vans, folks who will cook outside, use the vault toilets and won't mind there's no TV signal. RV parks, on the other hand, often accommodate even the biggest motorhomes, include at least a few amenities, maybe even fitness rooms, golf courses, saunas, craft areas, and live evening entertainment.

Our current home was a campground that had transitioned at some point to include RVs. We had a site with electric and fresh water, but without a sewer connection we were showering in the campground's facilities to prolong the stretch between trips to the dump station where we could empty our black water tank. We'd stayed in places like this before and had learned how to conserve water.

We were grateful for the wildfire restrictions banning campfires for the time being—no smoke to contend with. Between that and the heat, we had few neighbors.

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Watching neighbors is a favorite pastime for a lot of RVers, me included. We watch, hoping to catch something we can use: How do they back in? Do they have a water filter set-up that's better than ours?

Other than our new neighbor we'd only noticed one other camper in the loop of sites where our fifth wheel sat. The trailer was about twenty-five feet long, with its single door almost in the middle. We'd thought about a trailer when we first started looking at RVs, and quickly eliminated them from our list for a new one because they're tricky to back, and the hitch itself adds length we were trying to avoid.

We hadn't caught sight of the owner, though we had seen a car in front of it when we first arrived yesterday morning, then a pick-up truck with a magnetic sign on the door later in the day. Neighbors with local visitors, I assumed; nothing unusual about that. They even left their outside light on all the time, as if welcoming anyone who might decide to drop by after dark.

It was a new trailer, or at least it looked new, and it hadn't been sitting there for long—though it was hard to tell in the desert where weeds and grass don't grow the way they do in other environments. A cooler sat outside the door and two folded lawn chairs leaned against the side of the trailer. We'd seen no signs of life other than these clues that someone, at some point, had been around it. It had been all quiet in the neighborhood.

And that was what we were here for: peace and quiet. Settled on the edge of the Superstition Wilderness with the stark dark rock of The

Flatiron peak looming just outside our windows, we were in the perfect spot.

Perfect until the neighbor's little dog starting yapping.

I leaned away from the window. Our door came open and Walt clambered up the steps into the RV, slamming the door behind him (sometimes slamming is the only way to get these metal doors to close completely). His face beaded sweat and he headed straight up our two steps into the bathroom-bedroom area to throw cold water over his head and wash his hands after being close to a doggie-inhabited home.

I pulled the drinking water jug from the refrigerator for him. He gulped half before handing it back and I refilled it from a gallon container on the counter.

“Moxie and Poopsie,” Walt said, mopping his brow again. “She just bought that Class C from the same place we were just at.”

“You’re kidding. Did she have the pleasure of Bradley’s company?”

He shook his head, grinning. “True to her name, she showed some moxie and demanded another sales person.”

She might not have known how to connect her water hose, but she did have nerve. RVing as a solo female showed some moxie, too, at least in my book.

“If we go back, we should ask for Mr. Perkins, the owner. Moxie said he treated her with kid gloves and made sure she got a great deal on

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her rig.” He slugged down more water and stared out the kitchen window toward the mountain. “Can’t believe how hot it is out there.”

I topped off the water jug and set it back inside the refrigerator. “You couldn’t drag me into RVs With Perks for a million dollars,” I said. “It’s not like they did her any favors by not showing her how to do something as simple as hook up her water.”

Walt shrugged. “Moxie strikes me as somebody who might have told them she could handle it, thinking she didn’t need any help.”

“Could be.” I peered out the window in the direction of her RV. She was inside and looked like she was measuring the windows. Maybe she was going to place silver reflective screens in them to shield the interior from the sun. We’d heard putting them inside the rig—which is common—is actually bad for the seals around the windows, drying them out faster, but I wasn’t going to say anything. Moxie clearly had her own way of doing things.

“Nap time,” Walt said, and I couldn’t help agreeing.

This was our second day in the campground and our second afternoon nap. The first one had taught me the value of “siesta,” something I’d heard about growing up in Ohio where only the sick, lazy and elderly dared take them. Out here in the desert, not taking a siesta bordered on lunacy.

I woke before Walt, which was unusual, so I eased myself out of bed and padded out of our sleeping area, through our tiny bathroom, and down the two steps into the kitchen and living room. We’d put our own reflective material over some of the windows (taping them on the outside

with good old duct tape), and though it kept our rig cooler, it made the inside gloomy and dim, even in the brightest sunshine. At least we'd left the window facing the street—and Moxie's RV—partially uncovered. Staying cool is one thing, but when your neighbors almost always start out as strangers, vigilance outranks comfort any day.

I poured a little almond milk into the coffee left in my mug and sipped on it. Ah! Only my sweetheart could make coffee so well it was as good cold as it was steaming. I walked to the small loveseat and set my mug on the table next to it. All looked quiet at Moxie's motorhome. Maybe she was taking a snooze, too.

Across the way, a shiny blue SUV rolled to a stop in front of the trailer. I'd never seen that vehicle at that site before. Maybe another visitor.

Walt stirred in the bedroom. We'd already eaten our main meal of the day, opting to try a restaurant in Phoenix while we were there. It was, like so many, a disappointment. And it had left me still feeling full and sluggish, despite the nap. I decided I'd eat an apple later if I did get hungry.

Rustling in the bedroom told me Walt was stirring. "Hey, sleepy—"

A scream cut through the walls of the RV. I whirled to look out the window. A dark-haired woman was doubled over in front of the trailer, hands to her face, shaking her head back and forth. A man in his

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late twenties or early thirties came bounding out of the RV after her, his hands searching his pockets. He pulled a cell phone from one of them.

Walt rushed to our door, yanking it open. "I'll be right back."

I was quick on his heels, making sure I grabbed my keys. Across the street, Moxie's dog yelped inside her Class C. Our quiet neighborhood had gone to the dogs.

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