

Chapter One

The raven's wing feathers gleamed, black and wet looking in the morning sun, like ink freshly spilled from the bottle. The bird walked with a stiff-legged gait, wings held to its sides as if pinned there. To maintain equilibrium, just before thrusting its pointed beak into the warm, oozing mass at the side of the roadway, it raised one wing like a high-wire artist's balancing arm and jabbed downward with its head.

The raven had no way of knowing—and its tiny brain would not have been able to comprehend, even had it witnessed the event—how this morning meal had come to be here at the edge of the desert road that ran north-south, skirting the eastern shore of the Salton Sea. The raven hadn't seen the jackrabbit waiting patiently on the side of the highway at dawn, hadn't seen the red 1974 Camaro that came barreling up the road twenty miles an hour faster than the posted speed limit, certainly hadn't seen the driver of the Camaro spot the jackrabbit and swerve, aiming for the creature instead of trying to dodge it. The raven hadn't seen the jackrabbit twist mid-stride, with a vain hope of avoiding the onrushing fender. The raven hadn't even heard the whine of the Camaro's engine as it disappeared up the road or the laughter of the driver and his passengers as the jackrabbit twitched and died in the sun's first light.

The raven was only pleased to have found the meal. A bit of intestine clamped firmly in its beak, the raven hopped backward two steps, cocked its head both ways to look for predators, and then, catching sight of an approaching vehicle, took flight.

Below, the jackrabbit's warm corpse waited for other scavengers—insect, avian, and mammal—to clean its bones. Death at the edge of the Salton Sea was nothing new, and certainly it was nothing that rabbits or ravens contemplated in any way. It simply was.

Carter Haynes had an office in a high-rise building in San Diego with windows overlooking the harbor, the bay, and the Coronado bridge. His receptionist was hot and wore skirts that showed most of her thigh, he drove a Lincoln Town Car, his condo had an even better view than his office, and his bank account was healthy. The national economy was taking a nose-dive and terrorists had attacked American shores, but Carter was, so far, insulated from those events. And the President was talking about cutting capital gains taxes. Life was good.

Today, Carter was far from that office and that condo and the wife who shared it with him. He had, a short while ago, driven past a water tower on which a line was painted to delineate sea level, and that line was far above the highway. His Town Car's A/C kept the valley's heat at bay but the day would unquestionably be a scorcher. Vivaldi on CD isolated him from the outside world; the *Four Seasons*, moving through their progressive stages, formed a protective bubble around him as he buzzed through the unfriendly landscape. Here, in Southern California's agricultural heart, Carter felt supremely out of place. He was city folk personified. He was a real estate developer.

The only sense that needed to extend out of the car and into the farmland was sight. He watched fields of alfalfa and lettuce and sugar beets whipping by, saw tractors churning earth, giant stacks of hay under green or blue tarpaulins, insects spinning crazily

around the car in the wake of its passing.

At El Centro he pulled off the interstate and onto the 111, which would lead him up through Brawley and Calipatria, up along the western edge of the Salton Sea to his final destination for today, Salton Estates. This was not his first trip to Salton Estates, and it would not be his last, not by a long shot. Carter Haynes was about to become a regular visitor to Salton Estates. That was the bad news, as far as he was concerned. The good news was that the visits would, ultimately, pad his bank account even more, putting him in a position to buy the building his condo he was located in, if that was what he chose to do with his wealth.

Carter knew it was probably shallow, but hey, *somebody* had to be the richest man in San Diego. Currently it was probably someone in the computer business, or maybe biotech. It had been real estate in the past, though, and he wanted to see that it was again. Once he'd achieved that goal then he'd see about having kids, raising a family, all that other stuff that just got in the way of getting up a good head of greed.

Anyway, a man had to have priorities.

Through a finger-sized part in dusty Venetian blinds, Lieutenant Kenneth Butler of the Imperial County Sheriff's Office, Salton Estates substation, watched Billy Cobb climb out of his squad car, hitch up his Sam Browne belt, and stride into the office. Deputy Cobb was tall, six-five, if his employment physical was to be believed, and watching him get out of a car always reminded Ken of a small piece of paper unfolding into a large one. This was only one of the ways that Billy Cobb amused Ken. Most of the others, though, Ken understood, had to do with what he considered to be Billy's somewhat slow mental processes, and the fact that the ICSO had given Billy a gun and a badge sort of put a damper on how much entertainment value he could derive from that.

But, he reflected, in Salton Estates, with a budget roughly the size of the average high school sophomore's allowance, you had to work with the tools you got. This substation was by far the smallest in the county, but Ken Butler had needed a Deputy and Billy Cobb was willing to work for him. And—so far, at least—he hadn't killed anybody.

Ken tapped on his desk as he sat down in his swivel chair. Knock wood.

The front door opened and Billy Cobb let himself in. His uniform was clean and crisp, but Ken could smell the cloud of cologne Billy inhabited as soon as the Deputy was inside the door.

"What's up, Boss?" he asked. The greeting was either ritual, or the only greeting Billy had ever mastered. Ken hadn't decided which.

"You need to get up to the Slab," Ken told him. "Carrie Provost called, says she found a skull up there this morning."

Billy Cobb angled his head, the way tall people did sometimes. He'd have been a good-looking kid if he weren't so damn stupid, Ken thought. Stupid people, it shows in the eyes. No spark there, no gleam of intelligence. Billy's eyes were practically cobalt blue, but empty.

"A human skull?"

"What she says. Of course, would she recognize the difference if she was looking at a human skull or a monkey skull, that's the question."

"Or a bobcat or a fucking bighorn sheep," Billy added.

"Just check it out," Ken instructed. "Try to calm Carrie down, she's a little

freaked out. And if it is human, tag it, bag it and bring it here.”

Billy Cobb saluted lazily and turned on his heel. Ken Butler watched him go, then hoisted himself out of his chair and crossed to the door, opening it to get some air in and chase the smell of Paco Rabane out. He stood in front of the Sheriff’s office and watched Billy’s squad car roar off into the morning sun.

It would be another hot one, he knew. They always were, this time of year. September in California’s Imperial Valley. The mercury would push past the ninety degree mark by mid-morning and rest in the low hundreds the remainder of the afternoon. That was a relief, though—in dead of summer the temperature could climb to a hundred and twenty, and passed the century mark an average of a hundred and ten days a year. The air outside held a lingering scent of dead fish from the nearby Salton Sea, mixed with the agricultural smells of the neighboring communities. The rich, fecund organic stink made even Billy’s cologne seem like a reasonable choice.

Ken raised a hand to a passing van that he didn’t recognize, a Dodge Ram 250, the bronze paint of which had oxidized to a reddish mud color, turned, and went back inside his office. Time to switch on the fan, try to get a jump on the heat before his mid-morning visitor showed up.

The van passed through the rather magnanimously-titled Salton Estates in a heartbeat. Penny Rice barely noticed the collection of dusty, sun-bleached single-story buildings. The overall color scheme was monochromatic; except for the blue of the sky reflected in the sea, almost the entire landscape—mud and rocks and bushes and buildings—was the same flat ocher color.

One minute the van rumbled through desert scenery, the Chocolate Mountains hunkering on the right, a low muddy slope dropping to the gentle lap of the Salton Sea on the left, to the west as they drove up the north/south highway. They’d already dropped off Larry Melton, down toward the south end of the range, and Dieter Holtz near Niland. Now it was Penny’s turn.

Mick Beachum had the wheel, and the passenger seat next to him was empty. Penny used the back seat to spread out and do a final triple-check of her pack and everything she’d be carrying in with her, but she also avoided the front for another, more personal, reason. Mick had been getting more aggressive in his attentions lately—had, she was sure, arranged the drop points specifically so that the two of them would drive this last leg alone. She wanted the bulk of the seat back between them; a symbolic shield if not much of an actual one.

“You sure you’re okay about this?” he asked, craning his head to look at her in the back seat instead of watching the road. He had pulled off pavement a few minutes before, and they bounced over a rutted washboard track heading past the Slab and toward the Chocolates. “Not nervous?”

“Of course I’m a little nervous,” Penny replied. “You know, trespassing on military land and all. Not so much about getting bombed or anything—I’ve had bombs thrown at me before. It’s no fun, but I’m still here, right?”

“Can’t argue with that,” Mick said. He turned back to the front just in time to keep the van from lurching off the road. “You got your cell, your CB, and your GPS, so we can get to you in a hurry if we need to?”

“I’m locked and loaded.”

He was quiet for a few minutes, paying attention to the topo map unfolded on the passenger seat, comparing the lines on it with the jeep roads and washes that intersected the dirt path they drove on. He must have made the right choices, Penny reflected, because in a few minutes he had crossed the cement-banked Coachella Canal at one of the siphons and stopped before an invisible line marked only by signs on tall wooden posts. Here there was no wire fence, like the ones they'd found farther south when they dropped off Dieter and Larry. Penny read the signs, letters in stark black and red on a white background:

DANGER

LIVE BOMBING AREA

UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE

KEEP OUT

in English and Spanish, which did nothing to calm her nerves. She'd been vaguely jittery since they'd passed through Salton Estates, and more so since they crossed the side-road that led up to the Slab. Her destination lay on the other side of the imaginary line, inside the LIVE BOMBING AREA, and while it was true that she had a certain amount of experience with being shot at and having, as she put it, bombs thrown at her, thanks to the U.S. Army and, in particular, President George H. W. Bush and what she still believed was his deference to the gigadollars the petroleum business had put toward his election, it wasn't an experience she was especially anxious to repeat. Now, of course, the man's idiot son was in the same office, put there by the same petrodollar interests. And damned if there wasn't another war in the offing, though this one far more vague and uncertain, against an enemy who just might be the guy next door.

Climbing from the van, she realized that her uniform hadn't changed that much—she was wearing olive greens and tans, shorts and a tank-top with an off-white long-sleeved cotton shirt pulled over it and tied at the waist, thick olive socks under tan hiking boots. She'd packed her backpack much as she'd learned in Basic. She carried, as she had in the Gulf, plenty of water.

The big difference—besides who signed her paycheck—was that, in the Gulf, when she'd been blown up, it had been by a mine the enemy had planted. Now, she was crossing the line intentionally, leaving behind everyone she knew to venture, illegally, into a bombing range operated by her own government, during a time of high alert and roaring tension.

She settled her backpack on her back, tapped the canteens clipped to her belt. Full. She was ready.

And Mick had, of course, scrambled out of the van instead of just driving off. Typical, she thought. One thing you could say about him, he was persistent.

“You know where you're going?” he asked.

She gestured straight ahead, where the road they'd come up on continued, but more primitively, overgrown with desert brush. “Right up there. Into the hills, and then I

look for a good place to make camp.”

He nodded, his blond dreadlocks swaying with the motion of his head. “That’s it, then,” he said. “Hug for luck.”

Hug for luck my ass, she thought. But to piss off the guy who was supposed to come and get her if she ran into trouble seemed, at the very least, counterproductive. Once the project was finished, she’d talk to him, set him straight. For the tenth time. She moved toward his outspread arms.

He pulled her close, enjoying, she guessed, the swell of her breasts against his chest. He smelled like sweat and garlic, and his unshaven cheek scraped her face like sandpaper.

“You take care in there, Pen,” he said with what seemed like genuine sincerity. “Don’t take any stupid chances.”

“We didn’t take stupid chances, we’d have to cancel the whole project, Mick,” she said. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

Which, she knew, was nothing but the worst sort of wishful thinking. She’d taken the steps necessary to ensure that she would be fine, inasmuch as they were under her control. But the bigger questions, of course, were not at all within her sphere of influence. As she walked away from Mick, across the unseen line and up the primitive jeep road toward the darker-brown hills ahead, she felt Mick’s gaze on her ass, like an unwelcome hand, until he was finally out of sight.

Billy Cobb hated the way the washboard road juddered the squad car. The road up from town was mostly paved, but once you got back into the maze of concrete slabs that made up the area folks just called the Slab, the road wasn’t maintained, and then even that primitive paved road petered out and became nothing but dirt and rock. A man needed a sport-ute out here, and that was a fact. Butler, of course, had his old Bronco, which he seemed to love like the wife he didn’t have. And, Billy thought as he pulled the car onto the Slab, it really should have been the Lieutenant checking out something like a human skull being discovered, not a Deputy, even though he knew that Ken was supposed to be meeting with that real estate guy today.

Man had a fine brain, and he was fair. But he was shy, Billy knew, not hide-in-a-closet shy but it was trouble just the same. It got in the way of doing his job sometimes.

The good part of it was that there would come a day when he would step down, and then Billy would be there, next in line, logical choice. From there it was only a few steps up to a job down in El Centro, maybe eventually Imperial County Sheriff. Sheriff Cobb had a natural ring to it, and when he was Sheriff he could requisition funds from the County to buy himself a new Expedition every year if he wanted it.

And Carrie Provost! Jesus God, why did *she* have to be the one to find it? If ever there was a reason that humans should be muzzled, she was it—the woman could talk all morning about the texture of her Corn Flakes. Give her something genuinely interesting, like finding a skull, and Billy figured there was a good possibility that he’d still be here come nightfall listening to her jaw about her discovery.

He slowed down as he wove his way among the mobile homes, trailers, buses, broken down cars and camper shells that made up the Slab. There were only a few locals out this morning, it seemed. Old Hal Shipp sat outside of his RV in a broken-down lawn chair, the kind with the ribbons of contrasting colors woven together, but half the ribbons

on this one seemed to be sprung and trailing on the ground. Billy raised a hand to the old man, but got no response. Shipp's wife, Virginia, stepped out of their ancient Minnie Winnie—wheels gone, rust-covered cinderblocks propping it up—with two tumblers of lemonade on a plastic tray in her hands. She smiled and nodded her head at Billy. She was a good woman—a saint, the way she put up with Hal, whose memory was shot and who, half the time, thought he was back fighting Nazis in World War Two. Billy touched the brim of his Smokey hat at her and kept going.

The Slab was a weird place, there was no getting around that. It was, literally, a series of vast slabs of cement poured on a flat stretch between the Chocolate Mountains and the Salton Sea. At the beginning of Hal Shipp's war, the military had decided that the best place to train troops to fight the Nazis in North Africa was in one of America's hottest and driest deserts. Imperial County fit that bill, and besides, this was California's ass end, where the waste-brown Colorado dribbled down into Mexico, so there'd been a few farmers in the Valley but mostly empty land, and no one to complain about the noise. They'd built a camp up here, then abandoned it right after the war. There was nothing left of it but the slabs now.

Flat and level, the slabs were a perfect parking place for recreational vehicles. So that's what they had become. But not primarily for tourists, although its population exploded during the winter months, with as many as two thousand snowbirds moving in and parking their mobile homes on any unclaimed stretch of cement or dirt. But during the hot months, most of the RVs here were, like the Shipp's, permanent fixtures. People lived on the Slab year round, even though there were no services like water or plumbing or electricity and they had to drive into Niland to pick up their mail, most of them, because it was cheap. As in, free. No one taxed them, no one came around to collect rent or mortgage payments. Anyone who could afford a broken-down motor home and a generator to power it and some food at the market in Salton Estates or Niland could live there. The Slab attracted society's outcasts, retired folks, nudists, survivalists. A few drug dealers had set up shop there but they tended to be frowned upon, even ostracized. This was a white, conservative, blue-collar bunch, mostly, people tired of paying taxes and living by society's rules. Imperial County's only real concession to their existence was to send a school bus up, during the school year, to pick up the dozen or so young kids and haul them off to become educated.

One thing that had always struck Billy Cobb as strange, which he noticed again as he threaded between the RVs, was the yard sales. People hauled the most bizarre crap out of their homes and put it up for sale, and their neighbors bought it, putting their own crap up for sale to make room for it. This formed the basis, as far as Billy could see, of most of the cash economy of Slab society. Outside the Hudsons' Winnebago was a folded ping pong table with a sign taped to it offering it for sale for five dollars. Never mind that there wasn't a double-wide on the Slab with room inside it for a ping pong table. By the weekend, somebody would have bought it, and they'd set it up under the shade they made by jamming poles into the dirt a dozen feet from their trailer and stretching a sheet between them, and they'd drink beer and play ping pong for a couple of weeks until it got old, at which point they'd sell it to some other neighbor for the same five bucks.

In the past few days, Billy noted, patriotism had flourished like a fast-growing fungus among these people who had willingly turned their backs on governments large and small. Flags, those printed in the newspapers and taped to windows, small plastic

ones hung on foot-long sticks, and even a few full-sized cloth ones, were everywhere in evidence, competing for space with animal skulls, faded Christmas lights that had never been plugged in, random graffiti and other attempts at personalizing the mass-produced housing these people lived in.

Carrie Provost's mobile home was the same as most of the others, in that it looked like it had been decorated by a coalition of the blind and the insane. An army of ceramic beings defended its ramparts: gnomes, trolls, elves, deer, sheep, geese, ducks, rabbits, and a single pig, on the side that Billy could see on his approach. Most of them were cracked or broken in some way—a good number of them having suffered bullet wounds somewhere along the way—but the pig looked brand new, pink and shiny in the morning sun.

Aluminum foil coated every window, which was not all that unusual in the desert. It deflected the heat that would otherwise be magnified by the window glass. In Carrie's case, though, Billy thought it might serve the secondary purpose of blocking the radio transmissions of invading aliens. He had heard that she'd covered the whole roof of the trailer with the stuff too, but had never cared enough to climb up and check.

On rusting wire hangers, she had hung a wide and bizarre variety of found items from the edge of her roof. Anything discovered in the desert seemed to be fair game. The hollowed-out shell of an ocotillo branch hung next to the skeleton of a small bird, next to the carcass of a television set with its picture tube blown out, next to a shredded tire. The overall effect was strangely disturbing, a kind of museum of litter and cast-offs that meant nothing to anyone but its curator. Billy was a little surprised that Carrie had made the effort to find a phone so she could report the skull, rather than simply hanging it from yet another coat hanger.

He parked the Crown Victoria in front of her place, got out, and sauntered up to the door. It had taken him a couple of months, once he'd decided on law enforcement as a career, to perfect the walk he wanted to use. He'd adapted it from a John Wayne walk he'd seen. He kept his legs somewhat stiff, moving at the hips, arms swinging freely. He felt that this walk gave the impression of a coiled jungle beast, ready to run or strike at any moment, and emphasized the spread of his shoulders and the depth of his chest, two features of which he was especially proud. The chest, in particular, was the result of many hours on a weight bench in the back yard of his parents' home in Brawley. He didn't know if Carrie Provost was watching, or anyone else for that matter, but it didn't matter. The walk was second nature by now.

Carrie had a screen door pulled closed, with an open interior door. Billy tapped on the screen. "Carrie!" he called. "Ms. Provost! You here?"

"Coming!" Carrie Provost called from inside the mobile home. There was a clattering noise, like sheet metal hitting a concrete floor, and then she appeared in the doorway a moment later. "Sorry about the racket," she said. "I don't have room to turn around in here."

"We can talk outside if you'd rather, ma'am. It's Deputy Cobb." Truth to tell, he'd rather she came out than to set foot inside her place.

"Oh, you're here about that skeleton head?"

"The skull you found, yes ma'am."

She stepped down from inside, pushing open the screen. Carrie Provost was in her fifties, and she looked like she'd lived in the desert the entire time. Her skin was dark and

leathered, muscles stringy, hair bleached and limp. She had big stained teeth and her eyes had that perpetual smoker's squint, as if there was always smoke drifting into them even when she didn't have a cigarette going. She wore a baggy T-shirt with a Marlboro logo on it, a giveaway at some long ago county fair or supermarket promotion, and her thin legs protruded from cut-off jeans. Rubber flip-flops on her scarred and wrinkled feet completed the ensemble.

"Can I see it, ma'am? The skull?"

"Oh, sure, just a minute," Carrie answered. She climbed the two steps back into the trailer. Every time the screen door flopped open the cloying stench of cigarettes wafted out, as if someone had emptied an ashtray into Billy's mouth. He hated cigarette smoke.

Inside, there was another loud metallic rattling and then a muffled "Sorry!" from Carrie. A moment later, she reappeared with a plastic supermarket bag in her hands.

"Here you go. I put it in this Vons bag to keep it clean." The skull's outline could clearly be seen imprinting the hanging bag. She handed it to Billy, and he carefully set the bag down on the cement slab and opened it.

He was no forensic pathologist, but even through the scorch marks and black smudges of ash, the skull definitely looked human to him. A gold tooth shining up at him from the lower jaw clinched it. And the neat circular hole in the forehead, in combination with the larger, jagged one at the back of the skull, pointed to a cause of death. Billy felt his stomach flop like one of the Salton's dying fish. This had just become a murder case, and he was the first officer on the scene.

"Looks like somebody punched his ticket, don't it, Billy?" Carrie said. "That's a bullet hole, right? I seen that on TV before. Exit wound out the back."

"I'll have to take it to the lab to be sure, ma'am," Billy said, not wanting her amateur deduction to cloud his own professional judgment. "But it does look that way at a glance, yes."

"Well, I'm no expert," Carrie went on. "Just know what I see and hear, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, ma'am. Can you tell me how you happened to find it?"

"Well, you know the fire pit, right?"

The fire pit was where, most nights, residents of the Slab gathered around a roaring bonfire to talk, drink beer, sometimes watch the "fireworks," which is how they referred to military bombing runs in the Chocolates, and generally enjoy their freedom from both taxation and representation. "Yes ma'am."

"Well, I was over there last night, at the fire pit. Just talking and, you know, hanging out with the neighbors, having a couple of beers, I guess. Anyways, I got close to the fire once to poke a stick in it, shove some logs around and all. And that's when I thought I seen it, or something anyway that didn't look quite right. It was hot and all, though, so I just left it until this morning. Then I went back and poked through the ashes a little, and there it was. That gold tooth just about glowed at me. I pulled it out of there and took it home and then went down to the Lippincotts' because they have a cell phone, and I called the Sheriff. You don't suppose it was Arabs put it there, do you? You know, like in New York?"

It took Billy a moment to make the connection, since he didn't recall any Arabs putting a skull into a fire pit anywhere in New York. But then he decided that she must

have meant the Islamic terrorists who had attacked the World Trade Center.

“No, ma’am,” he assured her. “I don’t believe it was. Do you remember who was at the fire pit when you found it?”

“I didn’t say anything at the time, because, like I said, I wasn’t sure what I seen, entirely. But the usual group was there, I guess, the Hudsons and the Lippincotts, Jim Trainor, the Shipp, Rusty Martin, Lettie Bosworth, Hank Dunn...I guess the McNultys were there for a bit.” She stopped, chewed her lower lip for a second. “But wouldn’t it make more sense to make a list of who wasn’t there? I mean, if you put somebody’s head in a fire pit, you probably wouldn’t want to be there when it was found, would you?”

“That depends on when it was put there, I guess,” Billy replied. “You don’t know that, do you? Unless you check it every morning?”

Carrie Provost hesitated before answering, as if considering whether or not to give away a secret. “You find some great things in there once in a while,” she said finally. She pointed to a metal lunchbox suspended on one of the coat hangers. It was fire-blackened and the plastic handle had melted, but it was probably from the 1960s, and the cast of Gilligan’s Island was still recognizable on the side. “I found that in the fire pit once. And money, now and again, coins, you know, not bills.”

Billy found himself strangely moved by this side of the woman. A little frightened, but moved just the same. “Yes, ma’am,” he said. “I’ll tell you what. If you can write me out two lists—one of the people you know were there last night, and one of the people you know who weren’t there last night, why then, I’ll check them out and maybe we’ll get someplace.”

“I guess I can do that,” she agreed.

“I can pick them up at the meeting tonight, if that’s all right.”

“Oh, the big meeting.” She nodded. “At the fire pit, yeah, I’ll be there.”

I’ll just bet you will, Billy thought. As he headed back to his squad car, he shook his head slowly. The Slab, he thought. What a weird fucking place.

“Who was that?” Harold Shipp asked his wife. The world called him Hal, but she invariably went with Harold.

“Who was what?” Virginia countered.

“Who you just waved to.”

It took Virginia a minute to realize what he meant. That deputy, Billy Cobb, had driven past almost fifteen minutes before, and she’d “waved” as best she could with a tray of cold lemonades in her hands. He’d responded by tipping his hat, as best he could while driving a car. She had thought the whole exchange had slipped by Harold unnoticed, but apparently he had seen it.

“Oh, that was the Sheriff’s Deputy, Billy Cobb,” she said once she’d puzzled out what he was asking about.

“Cobb?” Harold repeated. “He’s from Georgia, isn’t he?”

“No, I don’t think so. I think he’s from El Centro or someplace. He’s a local boy.”

“Ty Cobb’s from Georgia. The Georgia Peach.”

“The baseball player?”

“That’s right,” Harold said, chuckling at some private memory. “And I knew a Cobb in the service, James Cobb, I think. He wasn’t from Georgia, though. Minnesota or Wisconsin, somewhere cold. He loved it when it was cold out, and damp. Sweated like a

pig when the sun came out and warmed things up.”

“He wouldn’t like the weather here,” Virginia observed.

Harold looked around, as if he needed to visually catalog the air temperature, which was already in the high eighties. After a moment of that, he looked back at Virginia, and she could tell by his blank expression that he’d lost the thread of the conversation. He covered by lifting his lemonade to his lips and taking a long drink. She didn’t push it. She had learned by now that pushing it would only result in anger or an argument, and she didn’t want that. It was heartbreaking enough to see his memory go, bit by bit, as if, at eighty-one, his brain had decided to shut down cell by cell. She had grown tired of compounding the hurt by pointing it out when he couldn’t remember something or follow a conversation. All she wanted to do now, and until the day he died, was to protect him from harm or pain. So she shrugged off his lapses, and she took care of him as best she could.

“Lemonade tastes funny,” Harold said. He moved the cup away and a little trail of lemonade ran down from his mouth to his chin. She dabbed it with her finger, and his hand caught hers, his touch impossibly gentle, his workingman’s hands restored with age almost to the softness they must have had in his infancy. He held her hand to his lips and he kissed it. For the hundredth time that day—and it wasn’t even noon yet—Virginia Shipp’s heart skipped and swelled and broke all at the same time.

Chapter Two

Ken Butler had poured himself a second cup of coffee, but it had tasted funny and he'd opened the back door and poured it out into the little weed-choked lot behind his office. The Salton Estates substation was in what had once been a bait-and-tackle shop right on the main highway, and the bait shop owner had tried to grow a garden out back. When the Sheriff's Office took over, they'd gutted the place except for a walk-in cooler that had been converted to a holding cell, and brought in a couple of desks and a teletype machine. Now Ken had a computer, a fax machine, and a couple of telephones to call his own as well. It was no high-tech wonderland but it did the job.

As he shook the coffee out of his mug he looked down the slope toward the cocoa brown waters of the Salton Sea, two hundred and some feet below sea level. After the little weed patch, there was nothing between here and the lake's edge but mud. Even from here, he could see the glint of dead fish on the surface of the mud, and their smell was ever-present. He was used to that stink, though, and it wasn't as bad as when the algae bloomed and decomposed or selenium and other chemicals in the water killed off birds by the thousands, so it wasn't the Sea's odor that had made the coffee taste funny. It was only now, thinking it through, that he realized it was a coppery taste in the back of his throat that had been with him unnoticed since he woke up this morning.

The taste was at once familiar and rare, like a species that a birdwatcher has seen pictures of many times but only glimpsed once in the wild. Rare, because it had only come to him four or five times—five, he corrected, because he could still enumerate them—over the course of his fifty-two years on God's green Earth. The first time had been on that day in Vietnam, the day he still thought of as the day in the tunnel, though he'd been a tunnel rat and had spent a good many days in tunnels.

Ken also thought of that day in a different way—as the day the magic came.

And when he'd tasted this peculiar flavor since, like fresh pennies caught inside his throat, those too had been on days when the magic had come back.

Which made today suddenly crystallize for him. Something would happen today, something strange and miraculous. It might be good or bad, but it was on the way, and there was no dodging it. Just over a week ago bad magic had struck in New York and Arlington, Virginia, but that hadn't been his magic. He was sure there was no relation to the strange taste in his mouth now.

He started to look back over everything that had happened since he'd rolled off his rack, just in case it had already taken place and he'd missed it. But he didn't get far at that before the front door opened behind him.

Glancing at his watch, he realized that it had to be his eleven o'clock appointment, right on time. He turned away from the Sea, closed the back door, and faced his visitor.

"Mr. Haynes," he said.

"Sheriff Butler."

"Lieutenant," Ken corrected. "There's only one Sheriff, and he doesn't leave El Centro all that often."

“Sorry, Lieutenant.” Carter Haynes stepped forward, hand out like a politician looking for a baby to kiss or a wad of cash to grab. Haynes dressed like a politician, too. His charcoal gray, pin-striped suit must have cost more than a thousand dollars—Ken knew that he, a man who tended toward boot-cut Wranglers when out of uniform, had a tendency to underestimate the cost of fine clothes—and the mere fact that Haynes wore a suit out here in the middle of the desert marked him for a fraud or a fool, in Ken Butler’s eyes. His thick black hair was carefully cut and combed off his face. He had intelligent brown eyes, widely spaced, and a fixed smile that looked genuine at the same time that it looked like a permanent feature. There was something a little unsettling in his skin, though, which was extraordinarily sallow, kind of unhealthy-looking beneath a layer of tan that looked so uniform it must have come from a salon rather than from being outside, and lips that were naturally as red as if they’d been lipsticked. An interesting study in contradictions, Ken thought. Carter Haynes came across as a man to be reckoned with.

But not one to be trusted.

He pointed to the guest chair across from his desk, a wooden schoolteacher’s chair. “Have a seat, Mr. Haynes. You have a good drive out? San Diego, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. It was very pleasant, thanks. Nice to get out of town occasionally.” Carter sat down in the guest chair, his lean frame making it look comfortable somehow. Ken sat behind his own desk, suddenly conscious of his own boots, worn at the heel and toe-scuffed, in the presence of this expensively-dressed visitor.

“Guess I’m just a country man at heart,” he said. “City living didn’t agree with me.”

“It’s certainly different than life out here.”

“But you want to build out here.”

“That’s right,” Carter said. “And I can tell you why. It’s because I know what life’s like in the city. I know there are plenty of people, people like me in San Diego and Los Angeles and Orange County. People with plenty of money, but who are tired of the rat race, tired of the traffic and congestion and noise and crime. We want a place where we can get away from that, a place where there’s quiet and natural beauty and peace of mind. We could afford Palm Springs or Palm Desert, but those places are getting overbuilt. What we want is a place like Salton Estates. Especially now, when those who can afford to might be looking for a place they can go that’s out of harm’s way. Nasty business back east, right?”

“Sure is,” Ken answered. People who knew he was a Vietnam vet kept wanting to talk to him about the nation’s war plans. He was tired of it, so he steered the conversation back to the matter at hand and away from the terrorist attacks that had dominated the national conversation since that awful Tuesday morning.

“You’re planning to build on the Slab.”

“Exactly.”

“You’ve managed to purchase that land?”

“That’s right,” Haynes said. “The government’s been doing a lot of unloading lately. Closing military bases, selling off land they don’t need or want. I happened to own some land they did want, near Yellowstone. We made a deal.”

It wasn’t Ken’s place to criticize business decisions, but he knew that developers had come into the area before, hungry to make a killing, and they usually were lucky to

get away with the clothes on their backs. Salton Estates had, in fact, been named for one of those would-be resort developments. Roads had been graded and paved, lots carefully marked off, a marina and a couple of model houses built—but not enough people had wanted to buy into a beachfront resort where the sea might rise up and flood your home, dead fish would wash up onto your property every morning, and the chemical stink would keep you inside half the time. The developers had run out of money and interest. The marina was flooded now, the model houses stripped for parts, and the streets and lots mostly vacant.

“You know other people have tried to build resorts out here, right? Without notable success.”

Carter Haynes rubbed his hands together like a hungry man sitting down to big meal. “I can’t give away all my trade secrets, Lieutenant Butler,” he replied. “But I can tell you that one of the major stumbling blocks those earlier investors had is about to go away. Another one already has.”

“Stumbling blocks.”

“That’s right. The first one is money—those developers paid a premium for land right on the lake, with a nice view of the mountains behind. A beautiful spot, and worth premium prices. If the lake was healthier. But it’s not, not so far. The Slab, though, is back away from the lake. You can see it but you can’t smell it. And it’s closer to the mountains, so those views are better.”

“And what’s the other stumbling block?”

“That’s the one I can’t tell you about yet,” Carter said. “That’s my secret weapon.”

Ken steepled his fingers, resting his upper lip and his salt-and-pepper mustache on their tips. “Fair enough,” he said. “So tell me about what you expect from this meeting tonight.”

“I’m prepared to make these people a generous offer,” Carter said. “I own title to the Slab now, all legal and above-board, and I could just evict everyone. But I don’t want to play the game that way. Those people are living there under a certain set of expectations, and it’s time for those expectations to change. But that doesn’t mean they should be screwed.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

“So I hope to get everyone, or as close to everyone as will come out, to gather around so I can tell them all at once what the offer’s going to be. Of course, over the next few weeks we’ll be visiting each one separately, signing releases and turning over checks.”

“They’ll like to hear that, I expect,” Ken suggested. “But you might want to keep in mind the kind of people you’re dealing with. This is a very independent-minded bunch. They tend to make Libertarians look like Socialists. You might be offering them something they can use, which is money, but you’re asking them to give up the one thing money can’t buy, which is freedom.”

“Do you think they’re likely to get vocal?” Carter asked, a note of concern in his voice.

“I imagine you’ll hear some raised voices.”

“Anything else?”

“I’m assuming—and I know what happens when you assume, but I do it

anyway—that you’re expecting some dissent, and that’s why you want us there.”

Carter nodded. “I figure it can’t hurt.”

“I don’t have any doubt that they’d let you down off the Slab alive, even if we weren’t there to keep an eye on things. But we’ll be there, just the same.”

“That would be good,” Carter said, his tongue running across his unnaturally red lips. “That would be really good.”

Ken was about to say something else when a screech of brakes outside the office interrupted him. He glanced out the window, and saw only a cloud of dust hanging on the still air, then the tall shape of Billy Cobb loomed into view, heading for the door.

When he burst through it he held a stained plastic Vons bag in his right hand.

“That it?” Ken asked him.

“It’s human, Ken,” Billy said. “And look. It’s—” He stopped himself, noticing Carter Haynes for the first time. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your meeting. It’s just—”

Ken pushed himself up from the desk and crossed the office. He gestured to the bag. “Let me see.”

Billy held the bag open so Ken could look inside. He did so, lips pressed together, silently analyzing the bag’s grim contents. He felt a sudden tug of urgency. Haynes was just a rich guy, a roadblock in the path of him doing his real job, and he wanted the guy out of his office.

When Ken had seen enough he looked up at Billy. “Get it down to El Centro, to the Coroner’s office.”

Billy paused, looking at Carter Haynes and back at Ken as if waiting for an introduction.

“Today,” Ken added.

Billy tossed off his standard salute and left.

Returning to his desk, Ken said, “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Carter said graciously. “Everything okay?”

“There might be a bit of a snag to your meeting tonight, after all,” Ken warned him. “Looks as if we may have an ongoing homicide investigation up at the Slab.”

Carter’s eyes widened. It was barely perceptible, but it was the first indication Ken had seen that the man could be made to lose his cool. When Carter Haynes spoke again, there was new tension in his voice.

“Do you think that’s absolutely necessary?”

Ken just looked at him for a moment. “It’s a homicide investigation,” he said. “It isn’t something I can just sweep under the rug.”

Carter looked around the office, waving a hand to indicate the surroundings. “You have a nice little set-up here, in a Mayberry kind of way,” he said. “Just imagine what you could do if you had an actual tax base here in Salton Estates. Luxury homes, real property taxes. You and Deputy Fife could buy some new trucks, upgrade that PC, maybe hire someone to answer the phones, you know?”

“And I wouldn’t object to that,” Ken countered. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to stall this investigation, if it turns out to be warranted.”

“There’s a chance it won’t?” Carter’s tone was hopeful.

“There will have to be some questions answered,” Ken replied. “I don’t know that it will turn out to be a full-fledged murder case. That’ll depend on the lab results.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed,” Carter said.

“Somehow,” Ken observed, “you don’t strike me as a man who relies a lot on luck.”

Four of them had made the annual Dove Hunt for all thirteen years. Vic Bradford had joined two years in. One of them, Ray Dixon, was a relative newcomer, with only seven years. And this was the second year without Hal Shipp, who was still missed by everyone.

Vic Bradford took mental stock as they cruised the towns of southern Riverside County. By now, it was all ritualized, done the same way every September. The first day, they said goodbye to their wives and families and piled into someone’s car, this time Cam Hensley’s Navigator. They drove up to the cabin they kept in a remote valley outside Blythe, unloaded their gear and groceries, and got down to some heavy drinking. The booze and storytelling went on most of the night, and finally they crashed for a few hours. The next day, bleary-eyed and hung over, the Dove Hunt began in earnest.

When they’d first invited him to take part, Vic had felt a tangle of conflicting emotions. He had just turned thirty-two, still young but starting to think, now and again, about thirty-five and then the inevitable slide into the forties and beyond. He was past that now, of course, and he realized that the forties weren’t as bad as he’d feared back then. Now, though, it was his fifties that loomed, and that really scared him.

He had felt honored to be asked. He’d heard that the other guys were going out hunting, of course. Then once he learned what it was really all about, he was appalled and intrigued and excited all at once.

He was only peripherally a part of their crowd, he thought, until he realized that not having obvious social ties was part of the whole idea. Cam Hensley looked like an accountant, with his balding, graying hair and thick black glasses, but he was one of the wealthiest men in the Valley, owning tens of thousands of acres of prime farmland. The thing that bugged Vic about him was his forehead, bulbous, as if he had extra brains inside there trying to get out. And while his hairline had receded almost to the point of nonexistence, right at the top and center of that huge forehead was this patch of black hair, an island of hair, unconnected to the rest, that Cam refused to shave. He kept it trimmed, which was new—until a couple of years ago, he’d grown it out and tried to connect it to his other remnants of hair by creative combing. But still, it looked like an aberration and Vic wished he’d just shave it already.

Silver-haired, tanned, and fit, Kerry Williams owned a Caterpillar dealership in El Centro. Kerry maintained an air of mystery about himself, though he occasionally talked about intelligence work in Central America during the eighties. Vic was never sure how much of that talk was true and how much of it was self-aggrandizing bullshit. He had no real reason to doubt Kerry’s word, but the self-aggrandizing part was undeniable. Kerry Williams considered himself a leader of men, and if this group was any indication then maybe he was.

Terrance Berkley and R.J. Rocknowski were closer to Vic’s social status and income level. Vic and Rock actually lived right on the Slab, while Terrance had a mobile home in a park in Niland, almost on that town’s border with Salton Estates. He paid for his berth, but at least he had plumbing and power, and since he lived with his wife and her twelve-year-old son from her first marriage, things like phones and an address were

more important to him. With his Marine-length haircut and broad shoulders, Ray Dixon looked like the soldier Kerry had once been, even though he'd never been in the military at all. Ray worked at the sugar plant in Brawley and lived down there, in a second floor apartment, with his wife. They had come together at their kids' Little League games—Cam and Terrance both had boys—at church functions or political fund raisers, at planning board meetings, at boat rental docks on the Salton, at the liquor store buying suds. There hadn't been any master plan, any grand design. They were just a group of men who ran into one another around the area, found that they had common interests, and decided to put together a hunting trip.

But that first one had not gone according to plan. No one could say, or would say, whose idea it was, though Vic suspected Kerry Williams. Kerry was the one, after all, with the special ops experience. In his shadowy Latin American, he implied, he had developed certain tastes that were hard to satisfy in *El Norte*. And he had the strongest personality; he could talk the other guys into nearly anything.

Strike the “nearly,” Vic thought. He had already proven that, thirteen times over.

They told stories about the various Hunts, usually the same stories every year. But the guys who had been there that first year wouldn't talk about it except in the vaguest possible terms. They wouldn't describe exactly how it had gone down, and that secrecy carried over from year to year. People who heard about the Hunt asked questions and made a variety of assumptions—that the men spent the week in Nevada, gambling and visiting brothels, that they went down to Mexico for the same thing but without so much of the gambling. Those who went on the trip were sworn to secrecy, though, and their close-mouthed satisfaction just made the speculation that much wilder. Vic was able to make some guesses about that first time, based on how the ritual had played out since he'd joined, but they would only be speculation.

As they always did, the second day after the hard night of drinking and shouting and laughing and, this year, bitching about the Muslims—the bonding time that was required if any of them were to get through this—they cruised the back roads of Riverside County, heartened by the sight of American flags fluttering in yards and from businesses and plastered to windows everywhere. Dove season was over, legally—it ran from September first to the fifteenth, then kicked in for another forty-five days in November. But they didn't want real dove hunters to be out while they were, so they habitually waited a week or two after the season closed. The delay just made the anticipation sweeter, and they didn't really give a damn if they brought home any birds.

Somewhere out there was their Dove.

This year, it was Ray Dixon who spotted her. It happened in Mecca, a few miles above the north shore of the Salton Sea.

“There!” Ray shouted anxiously. “Right there!” He pointed toward a *mercado* called Leon's. Its brown stucco wall was striped by the shadows of three date palms. Signs in Spanish filled its windows, completely obscuring any view in or out.

Stepping out of the door, oblivious to her fate, their Dove had a six-pack of Corona in one hand, and a plastic bag with some various dry groceries in it dangled from her other wrist. A thick tangle of rich black hair framed a pretty face, with huge brown eyes, smooth olive skin and a button nose. Her full lips were pulled into a private smile, as if she'd just shared a joke with the shopkeeper inside. Heavy breasts stretched a form-fitting striped black and white tank top that tucked into tight brown jeans. Her sandals

had thick wedge soles—too high for walking around town in, Vic thought, but they made her look taller than her five-six or so. All in all, she was a lovely girl, the prettiest one he could remember.

Cam, behind the wheel, slowed down as he passed her.

“Not bad,” he said, appraising her as he drove by.

“What are you doing?” Ray demanded. “You’ll miss her! Go back!”

“Patience, my son,” Cam said. He made a hard right at the next intersection. Heading around the block. “If it was too easy, it wouldn’t be a Hunt.”

“I’d just hate to miss her,” Ray insisted. “I mean, she was hot.”

“I got to agree with you there,” Rock said. “That body, she could do porn.” The ability to do porn was, Vic had learned, the highest compliment Rock could pay a woman. Angelina Jolie, Nikki Cox, Ashley Judd, Dolly Parton, they were all tops in Rock’s book because they could do porn. Not that they would, but they could. Janet Reno, Laura Bush, Margaret Thatcher, and Bea Arthur all shared a less elevated status, as women who could not do porn. It was, in its fashion, refreshingly non-ideological. Rock would vote for a woman for President, as long as the woman was built like Pam Anderson and her running mate carried the moral authority of Ron Jeremy.

Cam kept quiet, hanging another right, and then another. The woman had crossed the street and covered most of a block in the time it had taken them to circle around. The houses here were tiny stucco constructions on small lots, jammed right up next to one another. Cam gunned the engine a little and pulled up behind her. “See?” he said. “Put a little sport into it.”

“Look at that ass,” Ray Dixon said.

Vic had already done so, and found it exceptional.

“Oh yeah,” Rock said. “She could be a star.”

“Lookouts?” Cam had always been a practical man.

“Clear on my side,” Terrance Berkley called from the front passenger seat.

Terrance pretty much needed a bucket seat to himself or his bulk would spread all over the bench—he was a big, sloppy side of beef of a man with wild red hair that looked like he styled it with a blender.

“Nobody over here,” Kerry Williams reported from the driver’s side rear. Just the sound of Kerry’s voice intimidated Vic—it was low and gravelly and he always spoke with a tone of supreme authority. He was glad that he and Ray Dixon sat in the second row buckets, while Rock rode on the rear bench with Kerry. Rock’s muscular arms were crossed, his ponytailed head whipping from side to side as he watched for witnesses.

With the street clear of visible onlookers, Cam gunned the Navigator again and pulled up ahead of the girl. She was aware of the SUV’s presence now, and became even more so when Cam cut in front of her, one wheel jouncing up onto the sidewalk. Doors opened and men spilled out in a practiced move.

“Excuse me?” The girl said. She started to say more, but Rock slipped behind her and clapped a strong hand over her mouth. Cam grabbed her ankles and upended them. Within seconds, a gag had been tied across her mouth, her wrists had been bound with plastic handcuff strips, and she’d been dropped in the Navigator’s luggage compartment. Cam hopped back behind the wheel and squealed away. No one had shown up on the street during the process.

Vic turned back to look at her, writhing on her side, eyes wide with terror, a film

of tears and sweat sheening her cheeks.
The Dove Hunt was on.