

# CHAPTER 1

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**A** FULL MOON FOUND the man known only as Gar settled on his belly under the low-hanging branches of a juniper tree at the edge of Cowboy's barn lot. Dressed in desert camo, face and hands hidden under a coating of black and green face paint, he watched Cowboy's bunkhouse through night vision binoculars. The range was just over one hundred meters. Crazy Charlie was sitting on the front stoop sipping a beer, the glow from his cigarette a bright green dot on Gar's viewer. The sudden flare of light from the bunkhouse door caused Gar to wince and look away from the eyepiece.

He could hear a low murmur as Crazy and another man discussed something. The second figure stood on the porch for a few seconds, said something to Crazy and went back in the bunkhouse. Gar could see the flare and flicker of TV light through the windows.

*That's two.*

A light breeze drifted from Gar to the barnyard. An Australian shepherd crawled from

under the porch, sniffed the air and barked, a short friendly yap. Gar froze and waited to see if the dog would identify him as friend or foe. The dog stretched, turned, and put his muzzle up to Crazy for a friendly pet and a scratch behind the ears.

Gar grinned to himself at the thought of all the dog biscuits he'd fed to barking dogs on his bottle hunting expeditions. *Yep, dog biscuits will do it every time.*

A coyote yip-yipped. The shepherd barked back, a challenging tone this time, and Crazy muttered, "Knock it off." The shepherd barked one last time and crawled back under the porch. Crazy stood and ground the stub of his cigarette in the dirt, stretched and went into the bunkhouse. Gar looked away in time to avoid the flash of light in the binoculars. The flicker and flare from the TV stopped, a light went on in the bathroom, and in ten minutes went off. A reading lamp in the last lighted bedroom was turned out and the bunkhouse was dark.

Gar didn't move. In thirty minutes he saw the bunkhouse door open a few inches and stay that way for another thirty. And then it slowly closed.

*You know I'm here, don't you, Crazy? You always had that sixth sense when someone was watching.*

Gar waited another three hours until the moon set and the only light was desert starlight. Slowly he rose and then walked quietly and directly to the bunkhouse porch. The shepherd came out from under the porch. Gar fed him a dog biscuit, patted him on the head and then placed a small, round river stone on the porch directly above the steps.

Homicide Detective Gino Maretti slammed the handset back into the cradle. He always slammed the phone down, and he always looked angry—which he was most of the time.

“Grandfield,” he growled, “grab your coat. We got another one.”

Grandfield, Ronald G., Detective Sergeant for the Bremerton Police Department, grimaced, closed the screen on his computer monitor and pulled his navy blue blazer off the back of his chair. He slipped the blazer on as he followed the slap-slap of Maretti's penny loafers down the hall.

After three years he still wasn't used to Maretti's profanity or his brusque ways. “But

he's a good investigator," he always concluded when he told his wife about another of Maretti's tantrums. Grandfield's wife always countered with, "Maybe, but I can see why his wife left."

They slid into the unmarked dark blue sedan, Maretti behind the wheel, always behind the wheel. Grandfield wondered if Maretti was ever going to let him drive.

"What do we have?"

Maretti threw the car into gear and stomped the accelerator. "What we got is another body in the same damned dumpster? The one where we found the Bernard girl. That's what we got."

"The same dumpster? The one behind the High Hat?"

"That's the one. It's getting to be a popular dumping spot. Get it? Dumpster, dumping spot."

"Yeah, I get it, Gino. And it isn't funny." He braced as Gino turned left onto Washington and accelerated. "Dang it, Gino. Slow down. The body isn't going anywhere."

"This one's a sailor. I want to get there before the Navy does."

A uniformed police officer was keeping the curious and the ghoulish away from the dumpster when Maretti slid the car to a stop in the alley behind the High Hat. Maretti was out of the car before the engine died. Grandfield—

Maretti never used Grandfield's first name—right behind him. A uniformed cop pointed at the battered brown dumpster and went back to crowd control.

*Give him credit, Grandfield thought. He's methodical at a crime scene.*

Maretti approached the dumpster slowly, looking at the worn, buckled pavement, and at the back door of the High Hat. Just looking. Looking for anything that wasn't where it belonged. He peeked over the high sides of the dumpster. "Hey, Grandfield. You better get the lab boys down here. And come look at this."

Grandfield tapped a key on his cell phone, hit Send, and walked to the dumpster. He peered over the edge. A Caucasian male in Navy whites was sprawled on a pile of black garbage bags, his trousers soaked with blood. A voice answered his call.

"Forensics."

"Hey, Dave. This is Grandfield. We got another job for you at the High Hat."

"Okay, we'll be there in fifteen."

Milo Jackson, Maretti's partner in an earlier life, flipped his notebook shut as he walked out the scarred steel back door of the High Hat. The nametag on his shirt pocket identified him as Sergeant Milo Jackson.

“Yo, Milo,” Maretti greeted in a surprisingly friendly tone and stuck out his big hand.

Milo pumped Maretti’s arm, and grinned. “Hey, Gino. How’s it goin’, pard?”

“Stayin’ busy. You?”

Milo shrugged. “Same old shit.”

Gino tilted back to look up at more than six feet of Milo. He nodded his head at an officer working crowd control. “How’s your new partner working out?”

“Matt Brandt. Good kid. He’ll do okay. Hell, he might even make detective. You did.”

Maretti laughed. “I think I had more fun as a sergeant. Meet my partner, Ron Grandfield.”

Grandfield and Jackson shook hands in a disinterested perfunctory way, none of the let’s-see-who-can-crush-a-hand stuff. Grandfield nodded at the door. “Anything?”

“Nope. Nobody saw anything. Nobody heard anything. Nobody even saw him come in last night. The barmaid found him when she was dumping the trash this morning. Said she recognized him, but didn’t know him except as Pike.”

Grandfield shook his head. “Yeah, right. Somebody just brought him here and stuffed him in this convenient dumpster. I don’t know,

Gino. Maybe you're right. It's just a popular dumping site."

"I told you." Maretti looked at Milo. "Did you pick his pocket?"

"Just his wallet. The barmaid, Ms. Twyla Eubanks, had 'Pike' right. According to his driver's license, he is Harold Leroy Pike. He has a military drivers license, and he was obviously a sailor." Jackson flipped open his notebook, tore a page loose and handed it to Maretti. "Here's a physical address."

Maretti stuffed the page in his shirt pocket. "You sticking around until the lab boys and the coroner finish up?"

"We can do that."

"Okay then. We'll check out his house, and then Grandfield has a report to write, so I think we'll head back."

Milo grinned at Grandfield. "How do you put up with that? Nice seein' you again, Gino."

"You, too, Milo. Tap it light."

As Maretti pulled the sedan out of the alley, an NCIS sedan, lights flashing, turned in to park where Grandfield and Maretti's sedan had been.

Maretti grinned. "Too late, boys, too late."

"What you got against our boys in the Naval Criminal Investigation Service?"

“Nothing really, except those arrogant turds always want to stonewall any investigation involving military personnel, and it’s my town, not theirs.”

The address on Pike’s driver’s license turned out to be a run-down duplex and south of the city limits. The neighbor, a road-weary woman wearing a faded pink housecoat, who could have been forty-five or sixty, turned out to be the owner of the duplex, and Pike’s landlady. She knew nothin’, ain’t seen Leroy for a couple of days, no, he ain’t had no visitors, and she didn’t know any of his asshole friends. But she did unlock the door to Leroy’s apartment for them, then shuffled her slippers back to her share of the duplex, muttering something under her breath about “damned cops” before she slammed the door.

Leroy turned out to be a tidy housekeeper, too tidy it seemed. The place had been sanitized. No trash, no empty beer bottles, no paper, no bills, not even any junk mail.

“A pro?” Grandfield speculated.

“Well, for sure somebody beat us to it.” Gino said in disgust. “Why put the body in a dumpster and then sanitize his apartment?”

Three days later Maretti walked by Grandfield's desk in the bullpen, flipped the autopsy report at him and growled, "Read this damn thing."

Grandfield scanned it. Harold Leroy Pike; age 29; occupation: Navy; military rank: Chief Petty Officer; weight, height, hair color, eye color, et cetera. But the listed cause of death stopped him.

"Holy shit!"

Several heads turned and looked at Grandfield. Maretti poked his head out of his office. "What the hell is going on, Grandfield? I never heard you cuss before."

"It's your bad influence, Maretti. Now I gotta go to confession."

"Well, if you get any Hail Marys, say a couple for me."

"Gino, did you read this?"

"Nope. I knew you'd fill me in."

Grandfield shook his head in disgust. "Okay, so here it is. This guy died from a broken neck. And somebody castrated him. According to the pathologist, he was probably alive when he was separated from his private parts."

"Damn, I'll bet that hurt. So what do you think?"

“Gino, did you ever have an original thought in your life?”

“Yeah,” Maretti growled, “I listen to you, you come up with an idea, I correct your mistakes and *voilà*, I got a new idea.”

“Okay, this is ghoulish, but I don’t think it’s the work of a sex fiend or a psycho. My gut tells me it ties in with the Bernard murder.”

Maretti nodded. “We’ll have the lab boys get us a DNA comparison. Maybe this is one of the guys that raped her. And let’s go find out who he was hanging with. Maybe those Navy cops will know something.” He stopped. “What do we know about the Bernard girl’s family?”

“No husband. A brother in the Marines. A mother living in North Dakota. Father deceased.”

“See if you can find out where the brother is.”

“I’m on it.”

## CHAPTER 2

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**S**HE DIDN'T LIKE jails, and that included this one. Not on a trumped-up charge of speeding through the rural high desert of Lake County. When she suggested bail and offered a credit card, the sheriff just shook his head no. "We only take cash, local checks or debit cards," was all he said.

At least Lake County's jail was clean. The bedding was fresh and the bathroom was scrubbed and disinfected. Deputy Karen Highsmith brought her soup, salad, and hamburger steak at dinner. She watched Monday Night Football for a while, a pre-season game that was pretty dull, read a magazine, and then had a good night's sleep.

At nine o'clock she was released.

She took a deep breath of air while Sheriff Bud Blair unchained the Harley. "Who paid my bail, Sheriff?"

"Let's just say that the record will show that your bail was paid by a Mister Owen MacDougal, a rancher from Christmas Valley,"

Bud answered. “You should also know he made the arrangement for your employment at the Christmas Valley Lodge.”

She didn’t say anything, just nodded. He patted her shoulder, locked eyes with her, and frowned. “You be careful, Ms. Holcomb. And watch for deer up through the Crooked Creek Canyon.”

Larae stowed her gear in the saddlebags, zipped up her black leathers, strapped on the helmet, and headed north on 395. The jacket had a skull stenciled on the back. The black helmet carried a Darth Vader shield.

She liked the cool morning air and the solid feel of the Harley. And she liked being out of jail. *Jail time certainly interferes with my plans.*

She rode at an easy sixty miles an hour north through Crooked Creek Canyon. A driver in a blue and white Ford pickup passed her on a straight stretch through a little valley of meadow and pastureland hemmed by juniper and pine-covered ridges.

Four deer trotted across a freshly-cut alfalfa field beyond a ranch house shaded by a tall row of Lombardi poplar. *Girls*, she thought. Cold diesel smoke columned above a green John Deere tractor as a ranch hand warmed the engine.

She goosed her speed to sixty-five as she left the canyon. Abert Rim, the massive cliff to her right, rising some two thousand feet above the valley floor, was almost black in the morning shade.

Clyde Whittaker, proprietor of the stage stop store at Valley Falls and yarner of local fame, watched the black rider pass his store. "The damned outlaws are everywhere," he said to no one in particular. "Hell, that one even looks like a girl."