

DEAD DROP by James L'Etoile

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

With one good score Billie Carson hoped she could begin to repair the damage from her past. But after three hours kicking rocks in the sweltering North Phoenix sun, all Billie had to show for the effort was a bag of beer cans and three Jeep lug nuts. She knew most folks wrote her off as a scavenger, but Billie fancied herself as a treasure-hunter. It was a romantic notion, in her mind—always looking for that one big find. She'd dug up wallets, rings, car parts, and good scrap metal out here. Not the crap you tripped over in the bottom of a desert wash, but leftover copper wire from building sites and steel tire rims left behind on the side of the asphalt. The recycling yards paid you good money for that shit, but money could never really make up for the broken lives she'd left behind. How could you repay the ghosts of men you'd led to their death?

Billie looked at the meager haul in her black garbage bag and calculated she wouldn't be able to buy a cold beer at Paula's Roadhouse on the way home, let alone help anyone else. Besides, the Roadhouse made her sit outside on the patio with her beer, on the days she could afford one. Paula told her once she made the regulars uncomfortable and wasn't welcome inside. The beer was cold out on the patio and she figured she wouldn't like the company inside anyway.

She knew there were treasures out here among the Saguaro cactus and creosote brush waiting to be discovered. Hell, she found her Maui Jim sunglasses out here, you could barely see the crack in the left lens after you got used to it. If she had the money, she'd buy one of them fancy electronic metal detectors that beeped and chirped when you found the good stuff. Paula would let her inside the Roadhouse then, for sure. Until Billie found her big score, she'd keep her head down and kick some more rocks.

Dry, spindly brush dotted the roadside. Thin branches cracked when you knocked up against them. The broken limbs were sharp and left red welts if you ventured too far off the beaten path. Motorists tossed, or lost, most of the good stuff she found a few feet off the road. Billie couldn't

imagine a world where you lost hard earned jewelry out your window and didn't bother to stop and go find it. If tourists on their way to Cave Creek, or Sedona, were so well off they didn't need their stuff—that was fine by her.

Billie spotted a set of tire tracks off the asphalt and her heart began to race. What if she found a broken refrigerator dumped in the brush? She could eat for a month on what she'd pull for scrapping a hulking appliance. She'd figure a way to drag it out of the desert before someone else grabbed it. The wide tracks bent behind a rock outcropping digging three inches into the sandy desert floor. Billie knew the vehicle was laden with treasure if it left tire tracks up to her ankles.

She slipped a dingy blue bandanna from her head and wiped the gritty sweat at the back of her neck. A makeshift canteen, fashioned from a Gatorade bottle and a length of drapery cord hung from Billie's neck. She unscrewed the plastic cap and poured the last of her water on the bandanna. The soaked cloth cooled her head for the climb to the top of the hardscrabble rock outcropping.

The view from the small rise looked down into a deep, sandy wash where the memory of scant seasonal rainfall from the monsoons faded into chalky dust. Patches of tinder-dry brush lined the edges of the dry bed. The heavens hadn't seen fit to nourish their shallow roots for months. A moonscape of tumbled rocks, sand, and broken branches, left behind by a distant flash flood, lined the bed. At the center of the sandy basin, the deep ruts ended. A second set of tire tracks painted a story of a stop before backing into the middle of the sand. At the end of the tracks no prize waited for her; no refrigerator, no mattress, not even a crumpled beer can. Whatever it was, Billie figured someone else got here first. She crawled down the rock ledge to the floor of the basin, kicking smaller rocks and watching for rattlesnakes along the way.

Down in the wash, the dry brush was taller than it seemed from the view up on the rise. Thin dried fingers of creosote bush towered over Billie's five-seven height, and the vegetation screened off access to the dry bed. The brush lay crushed and broken at the edge of the parched earth where the vehicle punched through the barrier. Billie hiked the plowed path, where dry shattered twigs snapped under her boots releasing the acrid resin smell from the creosote bush.

Hidden from the road, Billie knew this was the perfect spot for a quick illegal dump. Yet, there was nothing here. Maybe it was a quickie dump of another sort, she thought, a make-out spot for a couple of hormone-engorged teenagers.

She turned and spotted a bright white patch in the brush at the bottom of the draw. A few steps closer and Billie made out four fifty-five gallon drums partially hidden under a layer of broken creosote branches. She wouldn't have seen them if it weren't for the blue and white stripes emblazoned on the sides of the containers.

“Well, shit. This don't get any better.”

Billie swiveled around and tried to catch a glimpse of anyone who might be keeping an eye on the barrels. She knew she wasn't the smartest woman, but what she did know was people who stashed things in the desert, generally don't want them found. She also knew you dumped things out here to get rid of them fast.

Billie got on her knees next to one of the barrels, tossed off the layer of broken branches, and the hot metal surface burned her palm. She wrapped her bandanna around her fingers and forced the barrel upright. It was heavy, but she felt the contents shift as the barrel moved. She figured a land developer or machine shop owner needed a place to dump used oil, or chemicals they'd have to pay the county to take off their hands. Billie figured the empty drums would net her ten bucks a piece, easy. She'd dump the oil, or whatever was in the cylinder, back in the dusty wash. Her daddy always poured his motor oil out in the desert and Billie never even saw so much as a sick coyote.

She strained with the locking ring on the lid. It wouldn't budge. Billie ran a finger across dark marks where tack welds burnt the paint away from the locking ring.

Something good was in this barrel, for sure. Why go through this effort for used motor oil? If it was old pesticide, maybe she could wrangle a reward from one of them cactus-lovin' environmental places.

Billie grabbed a rock and hammered it against the welds. They chipped away after a few blows, and the bent locking ring fell at her feet. With the blade of a folding knife Billie kept on her belt, she pried under the lid. The lid popped and released a strong odor from within the sealed container. Billie grabbed her bandana and held it over her nose. The stench was unmistakable--decomposing flesh.

She used the tip of her knife blade, lifted the lid, and sent it clattering off the top of the drum. Billie held her forearm against her nose and blocked as much of the unbearable smell as she could. She stood frozen in horror at the sight of a brown-skinned man in the barrel, bloated and pale. The dead man's slack jaw opened wide in a silent scream, his eyes bulging outward, caught in a last plea for help

that never came. Billie saw the man's fingertips crusted with a yellow powder and an acrid chemical odor wafted up from the drum.

Billie dropped to her knees, felt suddenly dizzy, and her chest tightened. She feared the other barrels trapped the souls of three more people. She'd stumbled across a secret that was important enough to kill four people. Would she be number five?

Chapter 2

Mustard-yellow dust clung to the windshield and managed to seep in through the vents in Nathan Parker's Maricopa County Sheriff's Office SUV. The road to Billie Carson's place was little more than a set of well-used ruts carved in the desert floor. Three miles of bumps and washed-out potholes soured Parker's disposition with each jolt to the Ford's stiff suspension. A whisper of anxiety washed through him every time he drove this isolated stretch of north valley road.

He spotted the makeshift memorial on the shoulder and pulled off the road. He waited for the road dust to pass his door before he stepped out. The simple white wooden cross first appeared three years ago and Parker never found out who was responsible—responsible for the memorial or for the murder that took place here.

It wasn't any murder, but the brutal slaying of his partner, detective Josh McMillan. They'd been assigned to interrupt the flow of undocumented immigrants using the remote strip of washboard road to circumvent the Immigration and Customs Enforcement checkpoints in the valley. Most often, the vans, box trucks, or sedans packed with migrants would spot the Maricopa County Sheriff's vehicles blocking the road and snap a quick "U" turn. Until one didn't.

Parker and McMillan blocked opposite ends of the road, four miles apart from one another. McMillan called over the radio letting Parker know he'd spotted a vehicle approaching his position.

"Got one coming my direction. Dark blue panel van riding low. He's not turning around like the others."

"Want me to head your way?" Parker responded.

"Nah. A coyote wouldn't be this stupid. Probably a construction worker heading out to Anthem. I'll chase him back out."

Parker heard a click and static over the radio two minutes later.

"Mac? 10-9," Parker said, asking for McMillan to repeat the message.

Another click in response. The hills and washes in this section of the desert were often the cause of garbled radio traffic.

"Come again, Mac?"

Parker didn't get a response and pulled his SUV around and headed to McMillan's location. It was coming up on end-of-shift and Parker wanted to make sure Mac got out on time. Mac's wife Ellie would be waiting for him at their Lamaze class in Glendale. Don't make a pregnant woman wait.

Parker tensed when he spotted McMillan's SUV, door ajar with no sign of the blue van his partner reported.

Parker sped up and slid to a stop next to Mac's vehicle.

He jumped out, ran around the parked SUV and found McMillan laying in the roadway, a pool of blood around him from multiple stab wounds.

The Medical Examiner later told him his partner died immediately after suffering the stab wounds. Parker knew better. He'd heard the radio clicks.

Regret didn't come close. If he'd responded faster, if he changed locations with McMillan, if he'd taken a position within visual range... If only.

The killer took McMillan's body camera and the dash cam in the SUV didn't record the fatal moment. The slightest profile was caught on screen for a few frames. Blurry and at a distance the killer wore a dark t-shirt and a star tattoo was visible on his left forearm.

The van was found abandoned in a wash five miles away with evidence it carried several people in the cargo area. A coyote killed McMillan to ensure his human cargo made it to their destination. The price of admission to this country paid in blood.

As Parker regarded the memorial, it brought back the regret and anger once more.

One day, he'd make it right.

He pulled back on the road with one more glance at the faded wooden cross in the rear view. McMillan's death would never be behind him.

Parker focused on the road ahead and the call he'd received from Billie Carson claiming she'd found a body. Billie didn't frighten easily, yet the fear came through in her voice. Stumbling over a corpse would make anyone a bit skittish.

Billie knew Parker's number by heart. Eighteen months ago, he'd helped Billie avoid a trespassing charge filed by a local landowner. The landowner, as it turned out, ran a meth lab in a run-down trailer parked out in the desert. Since then, Billie called Parker at least once a week and reported stray dogs, people camped in the hills harassing immigrants on their way north from Mexico, or "them damn bikers" who smoked weed at Paula's. He tolerated Billie's constant calls because, he knew, in

her heart Billie was a good person who got dealt a bad hand. It wasn't her fault that life chased her to this remote location. There was a quality about the woman that intrigued Parker. She never talked about her past and mostly kept to herself. People didn't give her enough credit—whatever she'd been through, Billie was a survivor.

Parker agreed to meet at Billie's place because it sounded like she'd gotten liquored up—again—and needed some time to sober up. It was walking distance from the roadhouse so Billie wouldn't get popped for driving under the influence for the third time.

Parker pulled up to Billie's dented fifteen-foot trailer, and a cloud of dust washed over the relic. Billie sprang up from her perch on a plastic milk crate and ran to Parker's window. The desert dweller was worked up this time, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Hurry. I'll show you where he is," Billie said as soon as the SUV stopped in front of her trailer.

"Slow down, Billie," Parker said, lowering the window.

"I'm tellin' you I saw him with my own eyes."

"Who?"

"The man! The dead man," Billie said with a slur.

"You been drinking again, Billie?"

"Damn right I have. After what I found..." Billie grew silent and stared at her trembling hands.

Parker hadn't seen Billie this agitated and drunk at the same time. Whatever she'd run across in the desert spooked her. Parker let out a sigh, dropped the gearshift into drive, and said, "All right."

Billie was one of the locals who recognized the landscape by sight, the rock color, and the vegetation. So, it didn't surprise Parker when Billie told him, "Go north on the 60 and turn east when you see the ridge with the red rock quarry."

Moments after he made the turn Billie pointed to a wide spot on the shoulder.

"Park here. We gotta walk in from here. It's down in the wash."

The outside temperature gauge on the dashboard read 111 degrees, and Parker didn't relish an afternoon stroll in the desert. "How far?"

"A hundred yards, more or less."

"Jesus Christ, Billie—you'd better be right about this."

Parker pulled the county SUV off the road, shoved the gearshift into park and said, "I don't see a damn thing out here. You sure this is the spot?"

Billie wasn't there to respond, she'd already bolted from the vehicle, leaving the passenger door ajar so heat poured inside the SUV. Parker got out and tossed on a MCSO ball cap to cut the glare from the sun.

"Over here!" Billie said, pointing to the rock outcropping she climbed earlier. "On the other side."

Parker closed the passenger door, shoved his balled fists in his pants pockets and joined Billie at the base of the rock. The hardscrabble ledge reflected heat into the wash, and each step down became more uncomfortable.

Billie pointed and Parker saw three barrels on their sides, beneath a thin cover of dried and broken brush. A single barrel stood upright in front of the others. The lid lay in the dirt nearby.

Parker grabbed Billie's elbow as she started toward the barrels.

"You need to stay here while I check it out."

"I found them."

"I know that, Billie. You can't go messing with what might be evidence—more than you already have."

She hung her head at the sting of the last comment. "Be careful. There's some strong chemical smell coming off the open barrel. Damn near made me pass out."

Parker made his way to the barrels, making sure his path did not trample over the deep wheel ruts in the wash. He saw the crown of a man's head as he approached.

"Son-of-a-bitch."

He snagged his cell phone from his pocket and dialed a number from memory. "It's Parker. Tell the Watch Commander we've got another body drop. Looks like four this time. We're gonna need the full boat—medical examiner, crime scene folks, and a couple of units to secure the scene." He gave the location and hung up.

Billie crept up next to Parker.

"Another one?"

Parker nodded and let out a sigh. "Yeah. This is the third one in a month."

"Who—what happened to them?"

"There's been no identification on them. Best guess is they were illegals coming up from Mexico and got caught up in border violence."

“Probably one of those damned land pirates. The coyotes these days extort poor people for money to cross over. Wouldn't be the first time them cowards left their cargo for dead. Nobody deserves to be left like that.”

“No, Billie, they don't. No one deserves what these coyotes bring up from the border.” Billie blinked in response. “You said you caught an odor from that barrel? Something chemical?” Parker asked.

“Made me light-headed. It was a little sweet, but had an oven cleaner smell, ya know?”

“You feeling okay, now?” Parker asked.

“I think what I'm feelin' now is nerves.”

“As soon as the paramedics show up, I want them to check you over. I don't know what you got into. I want to make sure you're all right.”

“Thanks for that. Been a while since anyone cared. But, I'm fine. What I'm feelin' is more about who done this and why they'd dump them people out here. What if they saw me find them?”

“They were going to be found, Billie. If this is like the others, whoever dropped them here didn't go through too much effort to hide them. They could've buried them or taken them deeper off the main road. Tells me there wasn't a concern about finding the bodies.”

“Then why do this at all? These bastards make a habit of the cut and run, leavin' people locked in the back of a truck at the first sign of an Immigration patrol gettin' too close.” Billie said.

“I don't know what to make of it, Billie. Come on let's get out of the sun.”

The pair returned to Parker's SUV and escaped into an air-conditioned refuge.

Parker began making notes. “You still working with the refugee groups helping the illegals once they land on this side of the border?”

Billie shot him a glance. “I forgot I told you about what I been doin'. I got no problem with people tryin' to work for a better life.”

“I get it, Billie, I do. It's just—against the law. Some of those groups are a little radical. You gotta be careful, Billie. Not everyone sneaking over the border is a good guy. There's some violent criminal elements...”

“Like there is up here. A border don't make it no different. I remember what happened to your partner. The man who done him weren't looking to come to this country to start over—he was a thug, bent on doin' evil. Different from families looking for a future.”

“The Coalition doesn’t have the reputation for screening out the bad seeds,” Parker said.

“You think this has to do with the Immigrant Coalition?”

“No. Only wondering if you’re still working with them and if they’ve heard anything about these deaths.”

“These people have nothing. They’ve left everything behind and they’re usually running from drugs, gangs, and poverty. If I can give them a little support—it isn’t too much to ask.”

“Some think groups like the Coalition encourage more people to cross over. Or, they’re responsible for getting a bunch of people to come here and take our jobs.”

“Is that what you think, Nathan? I don’t see lines of people waitin’ to go and work in the fields, or workin’ construction jobs out in the heat. The people who say those things are too lazy to get off their asses and put in a day’s work.”

“Whoa, Billie. I get it. I’m not worried about people coming and taking jobs no one is lining up to do, it’s all the crime and violence that comes with it. You gotta look at it from my side too. Being here means they broke the law. There is a legal way of getting in.”

“Because they’re undocumented, you think it justifies what happened to them?” Billie said, pointing to the barrels.

“No. No, Billie, nothing makes it right. But someone is doing this and it could be a response to what groups like the Coalition represent. The anti-immigrant hardliners.”

Billie fell silent and glanced toward the dumping ground. “These people needed help.”

“It’s not like you have a trust fund to give away to the migrants crossing over,” Parker said.

“I have enough.”

Parker’s thoughts shifted to the dead in the barrels. If they crossed the border illegally, what made them desperate enough to risk everything, only to end up dumped in a dirty desert wash?