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A TOWN SHERIFF, *a* MOJAVE HERMIT, *and the*
BIGGEST MANHUNT *in* MODERN CALIFORNIA HISTORY



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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *MUSTANG*

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ALSO BY DEANNE STILLMAN

Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West
(Houghton Mifflin, 2008)

Twentynine Palms: A True Story of Murder, Marines, and the Mojave
(new, updated edition, Angel City Press, 2008;
first edition, William Morrow, 2001)

Joshua Tree: Desolation Tango
(University of Arizona Press, 2006)



DESERT RECKONING

A Town Sheriff, a Mojave Hermit,
and the Biggest Manhunt in
Modern California History

DEANNE STILLMAN



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“Renegade”

Words and Music by Tommy Shaw

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*To my father, Edward Stillman, 1927–1996,
coyote, shapeshifter, writer at heart*

A FEW WORDS ON NAMES

Many people let me into their lives so I could write this book. Some requested anonymity, and that request has been honored, either by a name change or not using a name at all. Other names were changed to accommodate the privacy of family members who were not interviewed for this book. Pseudonyms are generally indicated in the text.

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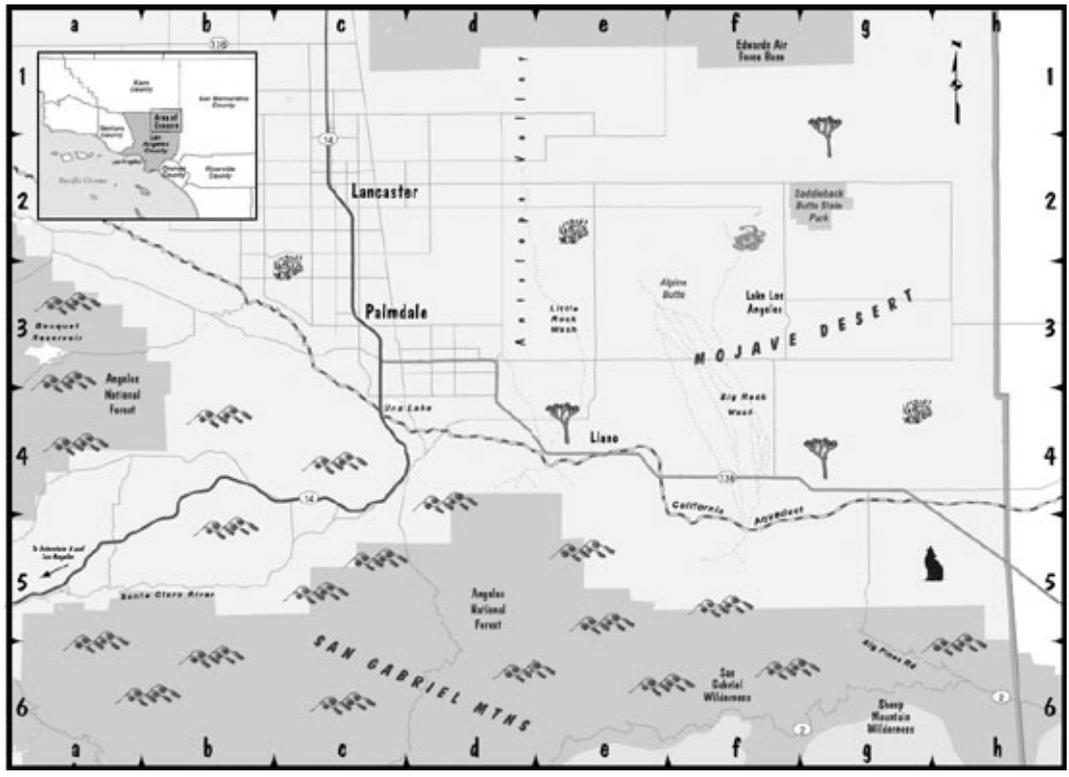
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*Oh Mama, I'm in fear for my life from the long arm of the law
Oh Mama, I'm in fear for my life from the long arm of the law
Lawman has put an end to my runnin'
And I'm so far from my home*

*Oh, Mama, I can hear you a cryin'
You're so scared and all alone
Hangman is comin' down from the gallows
And I don't have very long*

*The jig is up, the news is out, they finally found me
A renegade who had it made, retrieved for a bounty
Nevermore to go astray, this will be the end today
I'm a wanted man*

*Oh, Mama, I've been here on the lam
And had a high price on my head
Lawman said get dead or alive
I was for sure he'd shoot me dead.*

*Dear Mama, I can hear you a cryin'
You're so scared and all alone
Hangman is comin' down from the gallows
And I don't have very long*

*The jig is up, the news is out, they finally found me
A renegade who had it made, retrieved for a bounty
Nevermore to go astray
This will be the end today
I'm a wanted man*

*I'm a wanted man
And I don't wanna go, No, No
—Styx, "Renegade"*

"What's the use of holding down a job like this? Look at you. What'd you ever get out of it? Enough to keep you eating. And what for? " . . . That's right. . . . They don't even hang the right ones. You risk your life catching somebody, and the damned juries let them go so they can come back and shoot at you. You're poor all your life, you got to

*do everything twice, and in the end they pay you off in lead. So you can wear a tin star.
It's a job for a dog, son."*

—John M. Cunningham, "The Tin Star," short story that became *High Noon*

*Old Rattler, it is part of Nature's plan
That I should grind you underneath my heel—
The age-old feud between the snake and man—
As Adam felt in Eden, I should feel.*

*And yet, Old Rattlesnake, I honor you;
You are a partner of the pioneer;
You claim your own, as you've a right to do—
This was your Eden—I intruded here.*

—Vaida Stewart Montgomery, "To a Rattlesnake"

DAY ONE



A STRANGE REQUEST



ALONE IN HIS SMALL TRAILER, DONALD CHARLES KUECK had been singing a song. It wasn't a pretty song, nor was it a song that the casual passerby would hear on the off chance that he or she was in the vicinity of the remote little abode. No, the weird and discordant tune emanating from the trailer, always calling, calling, calling for someone to come and put him out of his misery, was broadcast on a frequency few could monitor, its sound waves fading in and out of the radio dead zones that pockmarked the vast desert expanse. But the singer was persistent and unwavering, and his song encircled the sage and drifted across the nest of the last desert tortoise; it traveled down washes cut by ancient floods and caressed the tough backs of scorpions, and one day it crossed a bajada, and the singer, yearning for his days to end, sang more furiously, sending the dirge into the higher elevations, up a butte studded with Joshua trees and granite slabs and bobcats and up higher until it was swept away by a Santa Ana wind—that high-voltage swirl of hot air that is born in the Mojave and is said to carry messages of evil—and it wafted across the high-desert scrub, over mountains and sea, and was heard by sensitive souls in other lands, far-flung sisters of the man who sang his own death song, and they called each other from Okinawa and Pensacola and Arizona and knew something was wrong. In another desert community outside of Los Angeles there was a daughter who also sensed impending doom, and she wrung her hands as she knew the end was near. Animals with their keener hearing responded to the softer notes of the singer's grim melody (for all living things respond to music) and would come in from points south, east, north, and west of the trailer to be fed and nourished by the man who loved them but hated cops. In the mornings, the jackrabbits were the first to arrive, arranging themselves around a special outdoor breakfast table with portions of food placed at individual settings. Other critters would stop by throughout the day on their rounds. There was a raven that would alight on the man's arm. Kangaroo rats—amazing for their ability to go for days without water and often seen skittering across the sands—would slow themselves, finding a rare moment of rest in their perpetual state of panic, oblivious to the Daewoo automatic rifle inside the

trailer, the magazines loaded with high-velocity rounds, and the handwritten will, perhaps calmed by the repeating reverberations of the death song (for all living things love an echo). But the company of animals was not enough to stop the man's desire to die. It is certainly within reason to figure that some of the animals, a coyote licking his chops possibly, or a tangle of rattlesnakes, may have even watched or slithered by as one night, perhaps under a full moon, while he was tweaked on a desert cocktail of meth, Darvon, and Soma, with the sound of his own blood thundering through his body, the Devil threw him a spade. "Oh, it's you," the man said. "Now what?" The Devil did not answer and the man said, "I see." He approached the spade and walked around it, knowing that when he picked it up, the deal was done. At the call of the raven, he picked it up and said, "Where do I dig?" "Between a rock and a hard place," the Devil replied, laughing at his own absurd joke. The man did not resist. He began to pace his property, looking for the right spot to bury himself, taking to the task with a kind of grim purpose, for he liked projects, and in fact eked out a meager living by assembling desert flotsam and jetsam into items that other desert dwellers found necessary, which is why his property was cluttered with junk. On this, the first night, he gazed at the skies, which were ablaze with constellations and shooting stars, and he stopped at various sites but they did not feel right and the same thing happened on the second. The Devil returned and said, "What's so great about the stars? Did they ever grant you a wish?" and the man said, "I can't remember," and then walked to the edge of his property. "Looks good to me," the Devil said, and so the man commenced to dig, with great fervor, sinking spade into hardpack and heaving the first shovelful to the side.

There might have come the quick flight of rattlesnakes deranged by the shifting grains of sand above their nest, but this would not have deterred the man, for these were his neighbors and he liked them. As his spade reached deeper and perhaps hit a layer of granite, there might have come the howling of jackals on the plain, and this may have given the man pause, for even a man used to living with the screaming voice of Mephistopheles would have been surprised by the hellish sound such digging might have unleashed. When the digging became difficult, the Devil laughed and threw him a pickaxe, which he wielded to break through to the lower regions. Sometimes, when even the pickaxe didn't do the job, the Devil shrieked wildly and ordered the man to hurry as he pried the massive boulders of pyrite and quartz from the dirt with his bare hands. On some nights, when the sky would grow black and there were no starlit shadows and it got so still that all you could hear was the thunder of blood rushing away from and back to your heart, perhaps the man with the Fu Manchu carried a lantern to his grave and watched the progress of his painstaking work, saw the shovelfuls of sand piling up as he heaved the dirt from his desert bed, until the last flickers of false light were pierced by another wrenching Mojave sunrise.

One night there was a full moon, which illuminated the silhouettes of night hunters across the desert—you could see the hair on the ground-hugging tarantulas and likewise on the fleet-footed bobcats up in the buttes—and the man who was both gravedigger and corpse admired his work and said, "I'm finished." But the Devil told him to lie down in his grave to be sure. The man balked at first, but of course the Devil prevailed. So the man laid down and gazed at the heavens and then closed his eyes. His breathing came easy and he was surprised at how good it felt. As he rested, he

thought of his work and within his grim accomplishment he found a certain kind of pride, because now there would be no remaining tasks or fetters, no more rebukes from the world he had failed, no remorse over the lives he had ruined, only the hole awaiting him at the end of his song.

In the morning, his eyes opened, and it was not the frothing heads of Cerberus he beheld but another infinite and wrenching Mojave sunrise. He cursed the Devil for giving him more time and climbed out of his grave. “Motherfucker,” he called across the empty bajada. “I’ll fucking kill you.” Then he retreated into his wretched little trailer where the temperature sometimes reached 110 degrees. Like all living things in the desert heat, he remained still—but unlike many of them, his mind did not. (Later, when it was all over, his sister, a nurse in the navy, would suggest that perhaps he was suffering from a brain tumor—how else to explain his peculiar degeneration in the desert? Why else would a man literally dig his own grave?) As the blazing sun crackled the shell of his home, he was filled with a kind of exquisite torment that could not be shut down, the chattering of voices that he recognized. *Daddy, why did you leave us? . . . Mr. Kueck, put your hands where I can see ’em. . . . Okay, shit for brains, it’s thirty days in the hole. . . . Don, do you need some help? We’re your sisters. . . . Dad, everything’s okay now*—and it was this last voice that always got him because it was his son, lying in the gutter with a dirty needle jammed into his arm and father would tell son that he was sorry but the voices would not be quelled, instead nourished and then subdued and then raging again, depending on the nature and strength of his desert cocktail. . . . Sometimes when the voices screamed, or when they left him and there was nothing, he prepared for the arrival of the sheriff, who occasionally drove by while patrolling the desert. He would pick up his rifle and wait. *You never know with cops*, he would tell himself. *I am not going back to jail. I don’t do incarceration.* But the moment would pass and soon his friends would return—raven and jackrabbit and desert quail and lizard, pausing on scrub and rocky perches, charmed by the softer notes of the man’s weird and discordant song, longing, as did he, for a moment of grace. One day a pair of sheriff’s boots crunched across the white Mojave gravel, its occupant drawn to the strange and urgent song emanating from the man’s trailer. In the blink of the raven’s eye, the creatures of the desert vanished, and the man became the final incarnation of himself. “The time has come,” he said to a snake. “Adios, my friend.”

FRONTIER LOS ANGELES

When Jesus heard of it, he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart: and when the people had heard thereof, they followed him on foot out of the cities.

—Matthew 14:13 (King James version)



NORTH OF LOS ANGELES—THE STUDIOS, THE BEACHES, RODEO Drive—lies a sparsely populated region that comprises fully one-half of Los Angeles County. Sprawling across 2,200 square miles, this shadow side of Los Angeles is called the Antelope Valley. It's in the high Mojave Desert, surrounded on all sides by mountain ranges, literally walled off from the city. It is a terrain of savage dignity, a vast amphitheater of startling wonders that puts on a show as the megalopolis burrows through the San Gabriel Mountains in its northward march. Packs of coyotes range the sands, their eyes refracting the new four-way stoplight at dusk, green snakes with triangle heads slither past Trader Joe's, vast armies of ravens patrol the latest eruption of tract mansions that, until a few years ago, were selling for NOTHING DOWN! Now foreclosed and empty, they are once again available for a small down payment, as the region waits for the endless boom-and-bust cycle to head north as it always does.

Over the years, many have taken the Mojave's dare, fleeing the quagmire of LA and starting over in desert towns like Lake Los Angeles, population 14,000. Nestled against giant rocky buttes studded with Joshua trees and chollas and sage, Lake Los Angeles is a frontier paradise where horses graze in front yards and the neighbors say howdy. "It looks just like the Wild West here," many remark upon driving through the town for the first time, and in fact it sounds like the Wild West: on the outskirts of nearby Lancaster, drivers can cruise down a remote stretch of road and hear "The William Tell Overture"—the theme from *The Lone Ranger*—as their tires traverse a specially engineered patch of singing pavement. The Wild West atmosphere brings occasional income to the region, with various westerns shot on the sets that dot the area, sometimes featuring manhunts of yesteryear. Yet re-creating the past was not the

original plan for Lake Los Angeles; like other planned communities across Southern California, it was supposed to be about the present—a history-free place where people would do something fun in the sun, like water skiing, even though there was no place to do so.

Oddly, this sort of dreaming was a tradition itself, dating back to the nineteenth century, when land featuring Joshua trees impaled with oranges was sold to eager buyers back east, expecting to find citrus groves on their property when they arrived. Decades later, amid the Antelope Valley's land speculation fever of the 1960s, developers purchased 4,000 acres near the northeastern edge, subdivided them into 4,465 lots, filled a dry lakebed, and named the place Lake Los Angeles. Ads depicted a happy resort town where water skiers jetted across the desert lake with stunning showcase homes on a nearby hill. But that portrait never materialized; much of the land was sold to buyers who never visited the area, and many of the homes were never built. Speculators lost interest and the lake dried up, never to be refilled, although every now and then, there are calls to turn on some spigot, somewhere, and make one more dryland playground.

Over the years, Lake Los Angeles filled up anyway, with people looking for work and solace, and sometimes finding both. Today, those who live here would not, and in some cases, cannot live anywhere else. Many are Mojave diehards. For the most part, the town's longtime residents—a mix of fighter pilots, ranchers, real estate developers, winemakers, Hispanics who work the region's onion fields, and blue-collar crews who grease the engine of the Hollywood studio system “down below”—get along just fine. But Lake Los Angeles is also a siphon for fuckups, violent felons, meth chefs, and paroled gangbangers who live in government-subsidized housing. For years, law-abiding locals felt they were under siege, as the city and its problems climbed Highway 14 into the desert, an underpatrolled area where if you called a cop, it might take two hours for a black-and-white to arrive. In 2000, the beleaguered town finally got its own resident deputy—Stephen Sorensen, a ten-year veteran of the sheriff's department. “Resident deputy” meant that you lived where you worked, a gig that was undesirable to some because it involved solitary travel to remote locations on calls involving violent people. “Out there, you're a loner,” Sgt. Vince Burton of the area's Palmdale station told me awhile ago. “Whatever happens you have to deal with it yourself.”

WHEN THE LAW CAIVIE

*Say, what was your name in the states?
Was it Brown or Jackson or Bates
Did you murder your wife and flee for your life?
Say, what was your name in the states?*

—Popular frontier ditty



IN THE BEGINNING, IT WAS NOT TOMBSTONE, DEADWOOD, OR Dodge City that laid claim to being the most violent of American outposts. It was Los Angeles County, although LA is not thought of as being part of the West, or even the Wild West for that matter. LA is the place that manufactures the West, or at least America's idea of the West—and itself. But there was a time that LA itself was the Wild West of mythology—and nearly as sprawling as half of California. While today LA County is as big as Rhode Island—2,200 square miles—in 1850, when the boundaries were first drafted, it was over twice the size, with a sparse population of a little over 7,000 people spread out across a vast area that was bigger than many eastern states. West to east, the county line ran from the Pacific Ocean to the Colorado River, and north to south from Santa Barbara to the far edge of San Juan Capistrano. About half of the population lived in the pueblo of Los Angeles—the hive that flourished and festered around a plaza downtown, encircled by adobe houses and, beyond that, private farms and community grazing areas as the city radiated outward. During a one-year period from 1850 to 1851, the murder rate was one per day—the highest rate reported in any city at any time in American history. In fact, the figure was probably higher; it does not include homicides in which the victims were Indians (in 1852, the majority of LA County's population), blacks, Asians, and Mexicans, which were not considered crimes. And it does not include murders that nobody ever knew about in the vast California wilderness.

Much of the reported violence took place in what is now downtown Los Angeles, originally known as El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Angeles—"the town of the queen of

the angels.” The place with the beautiful name was a squalid enclave of brawls, knifings, and human trafficking, where blood ran in the arroyos and dead dogs often floated by. “Los Angeles was a town of dust and mud and flies,” writes Nat B. Read in *Don Benito Wilson: From Mountain Man to Mayor, Los Angeles, 1841 to 1878*. “There were so many flies that Frenchman John La Rue would simply dip his fingers in to fish out a fly before serving the cup of coffee to a guest in his eating joint. . . . There were more wild dogs than humans. . . . Roving in large packs, they hounded carts, killed humans with their rabies, and created an awful din.” Locals would toss poison into the streets to get rid of the marauding dogs, and their corpses floated down the *zanjas*—the canals that provided the city’s drinking water. The affliction of the day was gold fever, which drove countless newcomers to California—a region with no government except Miner’s Law, the gnarly code that prevailed at the many camps that sprouted across the mountains and deserts of the West. The pilgrims came by land and by sea, on foot and horseback, quickly displacing Mexican ranchers who had settled on land granted to their ancestors by the king of Spain, along with Native Americans whose populations had already been decimated by the early Spanish incursions into the New World. Joining these emigrants were prostitutes and outlaws, themselves heading for LA. Their community came to be known as Sonora Town, after the most violent of the High Sierra mining camps. If LA didn’t work out for the misfits of gold country, they quickly headed for Mexico, as local attorney and writer Horace Bell noted at the time. Mexican outlaws had the same idea in reverse, often heading for California. On the dusty streets of the pueblo, the pirates would meet, fight, and frequently kill each other, in disputes that were resolved immediately.

From out of the city of angels flowed endless vectors of conflict, creating violence across all pockets of the far-flung region. Highwaymen preyed on wayfarers riding the Butterfield stagecoach across the Old Spanish Trail and its desert tributaries as they headed to Southern California. Other outposts up and down El Camino Real along the coast were magnets for raids. East of the old pueblo, the mission at San Gabriel—today a quaint and often bypassed historic site off the Santa Ana freeway—was the site of the biggest horse theft in frontier history, with the mountain man Peg-Leg Smith and the Ute Indian Wakara making off with thousands of mustangs, driving them through the Cajon Pass and into the Mojave, kicking up a trail of dust that could be seen from downtown Los Angeles. There were shoot-outs in the passes and draws where nowadays traffic is stalled for hours, and bloody standoffs in seaside outposts today known for good surf. Hastily formed posses drawn from dirty dozens in bars, the streets, and inmates in LA County lockup would pursue the outlaws. All too often the vigilantes would hang the fugitives, on the spot or right in the center of the City of the Queen of the Angels, as citizens cheered them on. Between 1850 and 1865, there were thirty-five unlawful executions, in addition to the many legal executions of record. “A person could be tried and condemned at six in the evening,” wrote one local, “and hanged at sunrise the following morning, if not sooner. It all depended on the mood of the moment. As one publication noted, ‘Life was cheaper than printer’s ink and white space.’”

It was amid this little-known creation myth of Los Angeles that the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department was born, decades before lawmen such as Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, and Pat Garrett galloped across the mesas into the American