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Silvertide

A Novel by Perry Slaughter

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Prologue

A Silver Tide

Carl McFarland stood beneath a motionless white canopy at his father's funeral, one arm around his wife's waist. The western Nevada desert was hot and dry as a kiln--over forty Celsius just past noon, and him in a black wool suit. He put his free hand in his pocket. Beneath his wadded-up computer he found the small, cold syringe that could end this whole charade. Dead clay fired in the sun, this tool could restore to life.

Pastor Kittridge, his father's assistant, read from a large hardcopy Bible beside the open grave, in a voice that carried to all the crowd: "'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.'"

Carl felt as if he were breathing hot dust, even in the shade, but he didn't sweat. He probably needed water. He watched Pastor Kittridge, in the full glare of the sun, mop his forehead with a flannel handkerchief. It was summer solstice, the longest day of the year.

"Thus spake the Lord unto Adam, our first father," said the young pastor, his high, smooth brow clenched against the sun. He sounded less certain when he wasn't quoting scripture. "Thus he speaks to us all--even to our dear friend Pastor McFarland, a man so good we can only give thanks he wasn't taken home sooner."

A high cloud veiled the sun, but Carl did not relax his squint. There was no man more well-loved in Sun Forge than his father. Pastor McFarland had been quick with a kind word, and always had time to hear the smallest complaint or glad tiding. He was a friend to everyone, not just his own congregation. The hundreds of people spilling down the cemetery lawn, rustling and broiling in their black clothes, bore testimony to that.

Of course, none of them had lived under the man's roof, in his zone of inattention. But neither had Carl, not for twenty-three years.

His eyes began to sting. He tried to clutch Eileen more tightly to him, but Hillary stirred in her arms and Eileen pulled away to rock the little girl. Those six inches of separation yawned like a chasm.

The syringe in Carl's pocket burned with cold promise. He blinked several times. It would be so easy to bring the old man

back to life. Five steps across the cemetery lawn, a snap of the catch on the casket lid, a swift injection of nanosolution, and his father would rise again. Carl would lead him back to the house on the ridge, and the two of them could sit down for a companionable beer. His father could meet Eileen and Hillary.

But Carl's legs refused to move.

". . . and thus we prepare to return the earthly remains of our dear friend and counselor to the dust from whence they came," Kittridge was saying, "comforted by the knowledge that what we loved in Ian McFarland, and what loved us so purely in return, has not died but lives on, and will one day rise up to be greeted by his Savior, and will live and walk again amongst us all."

Carl shook his head. Whatever constituted his father was locked inside that casket in an organ slowing decaying to jelly. There was only one way it would ever live and walk again.

He drew the syringe from his pocket.

Eileen's veil brushed his ear. "Are you all right, Carl?" she asked. Hillary had snuggled back down into sleep.

I'm forty years old, he thought. I've barely spoken to my father since high school. I've never visited at all. Why would he ever want to see me? With a sick sense of failing a test, he slipped the syringe back into his pocket.

"Ian McFarland," said Kittridge, head bowed, "you will be sorely missed." Almost too quietly for Carl to hear, he repeated, "Sorely missed."

The pastor nodded to Carl and moved to the far end of the

grave. The two men from the funeral home--Benjamin Destry, an old classmate of Carl's, and his son Andrew--stepped into the shade of the canopy. Andrew wore shades. Carl wondered what he was watching. Benjamin, solemn and damp, handed Carl a matte-black remote control with a single black button. "Just press it when you're ready," he murmured, and stepped back.

Carl turned to Eileen. The concern in her eyes was real, but the pale hair behind her veil was too like lifeless flesh in color, and he looked away. Clustered around them under the canopy and behind were all the people Carl had known growing up. Finish this charade and be gone, they seemed to say, as if it were Carl's absence and not a failed heart that had put his father into that casket. The crowd's impatience pressed like the heat of a blast furnace against his back, stifling and violent. He lurched forward, into the sun.

The Sierra Nevada loomed behind him like an honor guard, while ahead the desiccated skin of the desert stretched to the horizon, unbroken but for the verdant thread of the Walker River and the busy little score that was Highway 208. The cemetery nestled in the foothills, where the last of the mountain greenery broke like surf against the shore of the barrens. To his left, just that side of river, sat the town of Sun Forge. It was bigger than he recalled, but not by much, still a picturesque village set amid hilly fields and orchards and sheep meadows. Still a place too small and inimical to bear.

Lights sparkled here and there on the horizon, stingy

pinches of diamond dust. Sunlight on distant windshields?

The smell of damp earth brought Carl's gaze back to the grave, the bed his father would occupy in a moment, for all time. Carl wanted to lower his shoulder and rush the casket, hit it with a tackle that would dump it down the gaping hole like trash down a chute. His father was the one who'd ignored him all his life. So why did he crave the old man's forgiveness?

The syringe was a cold weight in his pocket, an anodyne to the sun's smelter. There was still time. He could do it. He could bring his father back.

But then what? His father would be confused at first, maybe angry when he learned what Carl had done. The mourners would give them no chance to get away and talk. Picturing the bedlam made Carl smile, but he would certainly go to jail when the Feds learned what he'd done. And what would become of his father, a reanimated corpse with two days' worth of brain damage? He'd be like a man with Alzheimer's.

It was the same argument Carl had been through a dozen times already. If he really meant to do it, he should have done it after the viewing the night before, where at least there was some privacy. But if he didn't mean to do it, then why had he risked stealing the Rapture solution from the lab in the first place and smuggling it on the suborbital from Boston?

Impulsively he stabbed the remote control. The casket lifted smoothly on the six small floater engines set into its base. A sullen breeze washed Carl's ankles. Guided and

stabilized by infrared sensors, the casket moved into the empty space over the grave and slowly descended. The syringe hung heavy and impotent in Carl's pocket.

As the casket vanished, Carl sensed a great sigh behind him, as if the crowd had released its breath. Pastor Kittridge began a prayer of dedication over the grave. Benjamin Destry gently removed the remote control from Carl's grasp, replacing it with a gold-plated spade. "Throw in the first shovelful now," said Benjamin softly, placing a hand on Carl's elbow.

Carl heard a buzzing in his ears. His last chance to speak to his father was gone. He stared at the mound of dirt on the far side of the grave, wondering how he was supposed to reach it with that raw, loamy wound in the soil barring the way.

"Carl?" said Benjamin.

The buzz intensified, joined by a murmur like wind through scattered paper. Carl turned his head. The mourners were whispering, craning their faces toward the cemetery gates. Eileen looked at Carl in confusion. Carl shrugged.

The sound resolved into the hum of a hydrogen motor, moments before a battered Toyota pickup careened through the gates. Its knobby tires clawed the grass as it fishtailed between monuments and crooked headstones. The truck jerked to a stop as the crowd scattered. Greg Winder--another aged but familiar face--hopped down from the cab waving his arms. His face was pale beneath a visored John Deere cap. "Ever'body gotta get away!" he cried. "It's comin' from the east! It's eatin' ever'thin'!"

Panicked mourners crowded around him, babbling. Carl lost sight of him for several moments, until Greg climbed up into the bed of the truck. Huge patches of sweat stained the armpits of his chambray work shirt. "I just come up 208 from Yerington," he shouted over the crowd. "It was--good Lord, it was swallerin' the whole damn town! Cars, houses, trees, people, ever'thin'. An' it's movin' this way! We gotta head west--Tahoe, Bridgeport, I don't know. Maybe clear to the coast!"

Eileen clung tightly to Carl's arm, clutching Hillary to her chest. "What's he talking about, Carl?" she demanded above the commotion. "What's going on?"

It was as close to hysteria as Carl had ever seen her. He could only give his head a little shake as he reached for the shades in his coat pocket. He noticed he wasn't the only one doing so. Time and temperature appeared in the upper left corner of his vision when he put them on, hovering at a comfortable apparent focal distance. He tapped the right earpiece for headlines. NO FEED, read the display. Chilled, Carl folded the shades and put them away again.

He noticed he wasn't the only one doing so.

Kittridge plowed past Carl and Eileen, shouting for order. Two dozen people were already past the gates, starting the cars that crowded the narrow road to town. "What's this all about, Brother Greg?" the pastor called out, hands on his hips. "There's a burial service here. You're frightening people."

A short but powerfully built man with gray hair fought his

way to the pastor's side. "Yeah, Greg," he said. It was Harold Thomas, whom Carl had known growing up as one of the town's four police officers. "What kind of panic are you trying to start?"

Greg took a deep breath. "It's some kinda--I don't know, a silver tide, like a huge film of mercury, comin' outta the northeast." His boots rang on the bed of his truck as he paced. "I tell you, it swallows whatever it touches, swarmin' over things like those ants in South America, and then--I don't know, it's like it dissolves 'em. That's all I saw. This was in Yerington, and I didn't stick around askin' no questions."

It seemed to Carl that his heart had stopped.

Harold said something else, but the noise of the crowd swallowed his words. More people were running for the gates. A chorus of car engines and horns clamored from the road beyond.

"We need to leave," Eileen said, seizing Carl's hand. Hillary began to wail and paw at her eyes. "I knew we shouldn't have come here. Come on, Carl, let's go!"

But Carl couldn't move. He was shivering. The war between calm heads and chaos swirled around him like Arctic wind. He turned back toward his father's grave as Eileen tugged at his arm. Across the desert, past the shoulder of Sun Forge, he scanned what he now realized was the unusually heavy traffic on Highway 208. Sunfire danced on tiny windshields, but the quality of the light was altogether different from the unfocused silver sparkles massing on the horizon. As Carl watched, the sparkles coalesced and ran together in a shimmering line, as if a second

dawn were about to break.

"Oh, you must be kidding," he murmured. What Greg Winder had described could only have been one thing, but Carl had refused to believe it until now. It was supposed to be safely contained in Cambridge, yet here it was, or something like it. "Scorched Earth."

"What is it, Carl?" cried Eileen. "What are you talking about?"

He yanked his arm out of her grip, watching the silver line thicken and dim and spread. "Get to the car," he said, not looking at her. "Get it started, get Hillary strapped in, and get ready to leave. Go!"

Eileen didn't hesitate. Carl heard Hillary's wail as they plunged into the crowd, but he couldn't tear his eyes from the spreading chromium sea. So this is what it looks like to an enemy army, he thought. This is the terror it was designed to evoke.

He noticed the gold-plated spade still in his hands, and hurled it with all his might into the open grave. It was hard not to believe the old man had died when he did deliberately, so his son would be here to see this. It was Carl's punishment for devoting his life to physics and spurning God.

In the inadequate shade of the canopy, Carl turned his back on the desert, ashamed and angry.

Mourners clogged the cemetery gates, and several were scaling the modest walls. Honking cars jammed the road beyond,

where Harold Thomas was doing his best to direct traffic. Off-road vehicles tried to skirt the knot on either side, while two or three dual-passenger skyhoppers bounded away in long, shallow arcs. Blocked by the crowd at the gates, Greg Winder's truck moved in fits and starts. Carl couldn't see Eileen and Hillary, but the spectacle set gears in motion in his head. He felt himself grow calm. He looked back at the silver film, trying to gauge its rate of advance.

A firm hand touched his arm. "I don't understand this all, Brother Carl," said Kittridge, "but don't you think you'd better catch up with your family? The dead can bury their dead."

Carl turned to the pastor, his father's successor, confused for a moment. In terms of age, Kittridge could have been an actual brother. "We're never going to outrun that stuff," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, "not with this kind of traffic. There's probably, what, only fifteen or twenty skyhoppers in town? They don't work well at altitudes much higher than this anyway. Maybe a couple of cropdusters out at the airstrip? Most of us won't get away in time."

The pastor's eyes had strayed to the gleaming, burgeoning tide. "Does that mean we shouldn't try?" he asked reprovingly. "'He that endureth to the end shall be saved.'"

Having scripture quoted at him always made Carl feel contrary. "Paul said to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. That's what I plan to do."

Pastor Kittridge turned to Carl with eyes hard and hungry as

cemetery marble. "You know something the rest of us don't?"

Carl scratched his head and gestured at the nearby town. "Pastor, did you ever dream of baptizing all of Sun Forge?"

Impatiently the pastor shook his head. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Now's your chance," Carl said. "Water's the only thing liable to hold that stuff off."

"Water?"

"We can probably save the town, but we need to soak down everything. And I mean everything. Come on."

With a plan in mind Carl felt better. Not happy, but no longer helpless at least. He led the startled pastor at a trot out from under the canopy and across the lawn, between headstones bent and yellowed like broken teeth, through the mingled smells of mulch and dust and, faintly, ozone. Harold Thomas stood outside the gates, shades on, shouting instructions to someone invisible while he continued directing traffic. To save Sun Forge and all their lives, they would need Harold's help.

"I hope you're happy, Dad," Carl growled, sensing the future contracting around him. He was home again and likely to stay a long while, if not what remained of his life.

Part I

Chapter 1

A Snowy Dove

Jenna Kemp, mayor of Sun Forge, folded her thinkrag in half and pushed it away. She sat back in her chair, staring down the length of the conference table. It was morning and she was alone in the council chamber, which was probably a blessing. Had anyone else been present, she couldn't have hidden her uneasiness, and uneasiness made her surly and fractious.

The latest harvest figures were in, and C-ration numbers were down over the previous year. Heavy snows in winter always meant slower regrowth in the spring, but even taking that into account, Jenna foresaw trouble. There was still enough wheat, milk, and eggs to supplement the rations, but there might not be the next year, or the year after.

That was if the harvesters stayed within a kilometer of the moat, of course. They could venture farther out into the barrens, but that required progressively more water. It might be all right this year since the snow pack in the mountains was so high, but what would happen after the next dry winter? The choice might come down to gathering food or maintaining the moat, and that was no choice at all.

Jenna sighed. The root problem was simple: Sun Forge was exceeding its ideal population. They took more raw materials out of the barrens in the form of food, clothing, and other supplies than they put back in waste and dead bodies. But when things were going well people didn't want to hear about birth control, and those first-aid kits with the condoms in them didn't show up very often anyway. They had no equipment for safe abortions, but that hardly mattered. Religiously the town had gone so far overboard in the past twenty years that mention of the word might get her thrown out of office, if not over the moat.

Maybe it was time to start encouraging exploration again. Early on, it seemed every young person in town had wanted to face the barrens one on one, and half of those who left never came back. Jenna had gone out twice herself when she was still full of juice. But as the years slipped by, as the satellite news worsened and it became increasingly clear that no rescue was coming, as the U.N. quarantine of North America took effect, these missions had slowly tapered off. There didn't seem to be any point. No one but Carl McFarland and his little buddy Orrin

Pritchard had traveled more than a kilometer into the barrens in over a decade.

Elbows on the table, Jenna ran her hands through her curly, graying hair. She'd been sixteen when the tide came in; fifty-six was an age she had never expected to see. There'd been times when the town was so close to collapse that another year seemed too much to hope for, let alone another month. Every day was a battle, but at least rescue had seemed possible. Now Jenna was tired and stability her fondest wish. Her dreams of escape from Sun Forge were long dead.

She pushed her chair back roughly from the conference table. She didn't want to deal with problems like this anymore, but if she didn't then who would? The majority of the town's twenty-three hundred residents were under forty. They had no idea what life was like before the tide. C-rations and army fatigues were all they'd ever known for food and clothing, and since few of them paid attention to the news, their world was no larger than the harvest zone outside the moat. Who could do this job if she didn't? Who would do it when she was gone? The council was worthless, including her husband Ray, and no one younger seemed interested in taking over for them.

Cold morning sunlight streamed in through the picture windows, picking out a century's nicks and scars on the surface of the conference table. Tree branches speckled with tiny new buds threw their stark shadows into the room. Jenna pushed the folded computer into a patch of sunlight to recharge, then

reached into the breast pocket of her camouflaged shirt. She took out a tattered holo of her father, Harold Thomas.

Jenna smoothed out the dog-eared, foil-backed picture in another slanting sunbeam. Her father's head and shoulders appeared, solid and in full color, only faintly blurry, seeming to extend far deeper than the thickness of the foil. Jenna had inherited her mother's nose, mouth, and hair, but her gray eyes and stocky build came straight from her father. "What would you tell me if you were here, Dad?" Jenna asked. "What would you tell me to do?"

Probably not much of anything. Her father would be in his nineties if he were still alive--but then again, they might not be here if her father were still alive. The day the tide came in, Harold Thomas had been all for hightailing it out of town. It was McFarland, the so-called expert, who convinced him to dig in and fight. Her father died that same afternoon when an airborne puff of silver hit him full in the face. It swarmed over his head and down his throat, smothering him to death before anyone could douse him with water.

Jenna had watched it happen. She still woke up soaked some nights, her father's head bright in her mind's eye, gleaming like some fearsome liquid robot's, slowly shrinking, dissolving, as its gaping mouth opened wide in a silent cry. Mostly the head was her father's, but sometimes it was her own.

If only McFarland hadn't interfered, the whole family might have gotten safely to Lake Tahoe, or even to the coast. Jenna

had never forgiven him for that, and she knew she never would.

Her father's holo flickered in and out of solidity as a fluttering of dark shadows eclipsed the sunlight. Something tapped at the window--a bird, apparently attracted by its own reflection. At first the sun swallowed its color and shape, but when it settled down on the ledge and furled its wings, Jenna saw that it was a white dove.

Chills raced up her spine. She tucked the holo into her pocket and pushed her chair back slowly, never taking her eyes from the window. Her legs trembled as she crossed the room and cracked the door. "Jim! Silvia!" she called softly. "Come here a minute! Quick!"

As Jenna sat down again, she heard the thumping of Jim Ivie's crutch. The door swung open.

"Shh, shh, shh," Jenna said, waving her hands. "No sudden moves. Don't scare it away."

Jim, who ran the resource pool, moved carefully into the room. He was about thirty-five, but the freckles scattered across his nose and cheeks made him look younger. His square, handsome face seemed creased in a perpetual smile. He leaned on a single homemade wooden crutch. The left leg of his khaki fatigues hung pinned shut and empty. "Don't scare what away?"

"The bird, the bird," Jenna said excitedly.

"Oh, wow." Jim leaned his crutch against the table and eased himself into one of the council chairs. The dove preened itself on the ledge. "That's really pretty, Mayor. What kind of

bird is it?"

"You don't recognize it?"

Jim shook his head. "Looks kind of like a pigeon, but not quite. Wasn't it Glenda Jones used to keep some pigeons on Lovelock Street?"

Jenna nodded, barely keeping herself in her chair. "Filthy birds," she said. "But not this one. Not this one."

"What is it? Where did it come from?"

Lord, what a dull man, Jenna thought. Strong, brave, dependable, but dull as a cat's scratching post. The dove strutted on the ledge, its chest puffed out as if it were courting its own reflection. Jenna pointed at it, trying to still the shaking in her hand. "You don't know anyone in town who has a bird like that, do you?"

"I didn't think anyone had birds anymore," Jim said. "'Less you mean chickens or turkeys. This sure is a pretty one, though. What kind did you say it was?"

Silvia Gonsalves entered the room. She was a thick, matronly woman near fifty, with dark hair pulled back in a severe bun. She ran the supply room across the lobby. "I'm sorry I took so long, Mayor," she said. "I was in the middle of--" Three steps into the council chamber, Silvia blanched and dropped to one knee. "El Espiritu Santo," she said, crossing herself.

"So you know what it is, too." Jenna rose from her chair to approach the window. Bright coins of sunlight, reflections from the silvery sea beyond the moat, flashed between the houses and

trees lining the next street. Jenna had to squint to study the bird. She glanced over her shoulder. "You recognize it."

Silvia nodded, an overstuffed olive in her green fatigues. "I know it from the stained glass window at St. Mark's, the scene where John baptizes Jesus. It is the sign of the Holy Spirit--the dove."

"A dove?" Ivie asked, reaching for his crutch. "You've got to be kidding. Where in the world would a dove have come from?" He stood up, trying to peer past Jenna at the miraculous bird. "My gosh, I've never seen one before. That's something."

"Yes, it's really something," murmured Jenna. The bird was cleanly, brilliantly white, brighter far than the whitewashed walls of the council chamber. As a girl Jenna had dreamed of astronautics--seeing Earth from orbit, living on the Moon or in the Mars colony, or cataloguing the asteroids. Now she felt much the same excitement. "There's another dove in the Bible, you know," she said. "It's the one Noah sent out from the ark to find dry land."

Jenna and the others watched the dove in reverent silence, until, startled by who knew what, it flapped away in a white flurry.