

# GRAVE SILENCE

*by*

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## CHAPTER ONE

On a still afternoon in early August, a couple of gas station robbers fished an old-style Samsonite suiter out of the Dolores River near Slick Rock. Bobby Lee Parker and Frank Horton had been dragging the murky waters under the Highway 141 bridge for the proceeds of a stickup they'd pulled two weeks earlier.

It was not their lucky day.

So far, they'd lost the final round of the watermelon seed-spitting competition at the Montezuma County Fair. Then Bobby Lee's mom showed up wanting to get high and helped herself to his last gram of weed. Now it seemed like the plastic garbage bag they'd stashed under some rocks had been washed away during the big storm that had startled locals earlier in the week.

Normally, this time of year, the Dolores between Slick Rock and Bedrock was a muddy trickle. The whitewater crowd abandoned the place by June, taking their kayaks and Discover cards back to Boulder. Soon after, the canyons were overrun with hikers busting their asses to see wildflowers and shit. A couple of these idiots normally got themselves mauled by mountain lions every summer. Then came the annual funeral procession of VWs packed with posers winding down their tinted windows and asking directions to Telluride. Bobby Lee had seen the worst movies of his life trying to get laid at that film festival.

He stared up at the bridge, where yet another dickhead had stopped his SUV so he could peer down at the river. The guy waved and yelled something about "boatable flow."

Ignoring him, Bobby Lee said, "Fucking perfect. They'll be down here with their fucking kayaks before we get done."

Frank let go of the suiter and stood upright, panting and wheezing. His light brown mullet was limp with perspiration, the combed-back sides drooping flaccidly onto his cheeks. “Damn, it’s a heavy mother,” he whined.

Reluctantly, Bobby Lee helped him hump the garment bag farther up the bank onto the flat. He figured maybe they’d lucked onto some other guy’s heist. “Open it,” he said and watched Frank plaster his DNA all over the striped canvas like the amateur he was. The zipper wouldn’t budge.

Eventually Einstein remembered he had a knife and used it to slit the thing apart. “Oh, man!” he choked, lurching back. “That stinks worse ’n a dead skunk. We gotta get out of here.”

Bobby Lee took a moment to digest the grisly sight of a decomposing corpse. He weighed his options. His midnight blue Chevy Silverado was parked at the Chuck Wagon Café a few yards from the bridge. The truck was well known in these parts on account of its Super Swampers and the custom-painted flames that licked across the rocker panels. A bunch of cars had gone by while he and Frank were searching the river, mostly tourists headed for the canyons. But tourists were nosey and took photos of every fucking blade of grass. Who knew how many of them had shot video that could later become Exhibit A in the kind of bogus trial Bobby Lee knew all about?

He stared around the riverbanks. They could haul the suiter under the bridge and bury it real quick while the earth was still moist, only he didn’t have a shovel, so they’d be doing it with their bare hands and Bobby Lee had never cared much for manual labor. Or they could do what Frank wanted and shove it back in the river.

The bad news was dead bodies had a habit of showing up. In a few days’ time, the Dolores would be a mud slick again and some dude would spot the lumpy Samsonite shroud. Murders were a big deal in the Four Corners, so the discovery would be plastered all over the front page of the *Durango Herald*. Someone would remember seeing Bobby Lee’s wheels. Next thing, the cops would come knocking at his door. Who else around here owned a tricked-out show truck like the *Midnight Rambler*?

Placing his hand over his nose and mouth, he said, “We’re gonna do the Christian thing. Whoever this dead chick is, there’s a family needs closure.”

Frank turned away and sucked in a breath. “You’re gonna call the cops?” He removed his Terminator shades and shook them free of sweat. His pudgy face was incredulous. “They’ll wanna know what we was doing down here. That cross your mind?”

Bobby Lee took a few paces along the bank to escape the stench. Frank was the kind who never saw the bigger picture. He had not graduated from high school. Bobby Lee, on the other hand, had finished two years of college before he had to suspend his education to serve time for an assault that was really self-defense. Unfortunately, the so-called victim was not just any retard who’d gotten antsy when his girlfriend flashed some leg at Bobby Lee, but the son of a Ute Tribal Council member. And seeing as the Ute owned the casino and employed half of Montezuma County, guess whose version of events the jury bought?

Patiently, Bobby Lee explained the psychology of law enforcement officers. “They’ll be real surprised that we’re reporting this, on account of our past histories. So they’ll know we’re not the guys who did it, otherwise we’d have been hightailing it out of here as per your proposal. Now they’d see that as suspicious behavior. Guilty conduct. Know what I’m saying?”

Frank mopped his face and flattened his hair back into place. “So when they ask us what we was doing down here in the first place, we tell them some bullshit about fishing?”

Bobby Lee shook his head. “Call of nature. We were relieving ourselves and that’s when we saw it. You got curious because it looked to contain something large, so you cut it open with your knife.”

Frank chewed this over for several seconds then asked, “Do I bury the knife?”

Bobby Lee did not call his buddy a dumbass, even when he acted like one. It was not Frank’s fault his father was a no-good SOB who beat on his family. Bobby Lee was aware of several head injuries that had sent Frank to the hospital when they were kids, so he made allowances.

“No, Frank,” he said like he took the question seriously. “Burying the knife is felon-thinking. If they ask for it, just give it to them. We got nothing to hide. Okay?”

“Aw, shit.”

Interpreting this as approval, Bobby Lee flipped open his cell phone and dialed 911.



Deputy Virgil Tulley hoped he would never get used to real depravity. There was only so long a decent man could stare into the chasm of horror before he got dizzy. On such occasions it was his habit to pick up his cell phone and call his ma in Ohio. Today was no exception.

Ma Tulley had important information to impart. “Your brother Billy lost his right testicle last week while they was dehorning.”

“No kidding.” Tulley crossed his legs.

“They sewed it back on, but Marybeth says that’s just for cosmetic appearance’ sake. He won’t be a daddy again.”

“They don’t need any more kids, Ma.”

“If I’d took that attitude you’d have never been born.”

Tulley squinted up at the ceiling fan. One of the blades was loose. With each drunken gyration, it clicked like a cricket in the mating season. His skin prickled. Sweaty nausea had dried in a thin film all over his body. Lucky he kept a change of shirt at work.

“I got that Chinese sow,” his ma said. “There’s money in pet pigs nowadays. They walk ’em on a leash in L.A., you know. Get bored and it’s always a good meal, I guess.”

“Ma, people don’t eat their pets.” He glanced at the case file in front of him. “Most people, anyways.”

“They got that Union County grand champion boar servicing gilts over Harper’s place. We’re next. Weighs seven hundred eighty pound.”

“That’s a shitload of bacon.”

“Owner reckons he can do four sows in an hour.”

“Who? The hog?”

A long-suffering sigh. “If you think you’re gonna get a rise out of me with your trash talk, you’re mistaken, boy.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tulley snickered. He was a grown man. He didn’t have to fear the pig paddle anymore.

“We’re getting them snout coolers,” his ma continued. “Had a farrowing decline last summer. Heat stress. That’s what the vet says. What you got to do to prevent that is keep their noses cold.”

“Like dogs,” Tulley noted.

“What you call for, anyways? I got better things to do than listen to you bragging on that hound of yours again.”



A few feet away, Detective Jude Devine cracked open a can of ginger ale and rocked her chair back, legs crossed, feet on the corner of her desk. She surmised Tulley had been reading the Pohlman case file. Made it as far as the dog-burger bit, then called his ma. Nothing like a debriefing on hog husbandry to hustle a sensitive soul back to mundane reality.

Tulley was the youngest of eleven and had something to prove. The impressive trappings of a career in law enforcement were made to order for him. No one polished his badge like this kid. Not so long ago he'd applied to the sheriff's office for permission to have an exact replica cast in solid fourteen karat gold. Concerned about setting a precedent, they'd turned him down. Jude had to talk him out of taking the matter up in writing with Governor Owen. Gold scratches like hell anyway, she'd pointed out. Why not spend the two thousand bucks on something more practical?

Tulley had taken her advice. Within days he'd plunked his money down on a bloodhound described in the *Lawman's Best Friend* as “a true gallant descended from a line of champion cadaver hounds and felon trackers.” The dog was surplus to requirements at Georgia State Penitentiary, where fancy new security was putting fine animals like him out of a job.

Jude had rustled up some not-exactly-kosher cigarette company sponsorship and persuaded her superiors to approve six weeks of handler training for Tulley at the Advanced Canine Academy. When he graduated, a posse of Marlboro executives hit town to stage-manage the occasion. They lured the Channel 9 people out of Denver to cover the story, and the front page of every local rag from Grand Junction to Cortez ran a picture of the suits benevolently awarding Smoke'm a monogrammed collar and five years' worth of Purina lamb and rice. In exchange for this largesse and the price of a K-9 vehicle, a Marlboro Man billboard—minus the brand logo—now dominated the vacant lot

next to the Montrose & Montezuma County Sheriffs' outpost in Paradox Valley. The executives called this a "subtle artistic tribute" to their one-time icon, now banned across the land of the free.

Every time Jude looked at the twenty-foot cowboy's chiseled jaw, she reminded herself that this *homage* was a small price to pay for the full-service status deeply coveted by remote offices. No longer would she and Tulley wait in vain for the deputies of Cortez to mark their dance card. No longer would they be passed over in big-ticket cases because someone supposedly had to be on hand in the canyon area to investigate petty campsite thefts, hiker disputes, and cattle rustling. Jude was a sheriff's detective, even if she was only a woman, and her substation now operated one of just four K-9 units in the region. As far as the dispatchers were concerned, that meant Paradox could pursue and detain upon their own initiative.

So, when the 911 call came in about a suspicious discovery in a garment bag, Jude tapped Tulley on the shoulder and said, "Tell your ma good-bye and get that hound on a leash. We're not wallflowers anymore."



By the time they reached the Slick Rock Bridge, an impressive lineup of silver and blue Ford Crowns were parked at the scene, lights flashing. Several state patrol troopers were directing the scant traffic and preventing guys with kayaks from heading down the riverbank. Another was taking statements from two males in their twenties. The shorter of this pair looked like the adult version of the fat kid everyone teased in school. Hands crammed into the pockets of his too-tight jeans, he stared at the ground as his cool-dude companion did the talking.

Jude parked her Dodge Dakota alongside Tulley's K-9 Durango, located her camera, and bailed out. Gesturing at the flashy Silverado parked in front of the local café, she asked her sidekick, "Recognize that truck?"

"Bobby Lee Parker." Tulley opened the back of the Durango so Smoke'm could dangle his dewlaps in the fresh air. "DUI. Served eighteen months for assault with a deadly weapon. Suspect in a couple of gas station robberies. Fond of the ladies, 'specially those in uniform."

Jude looked harder at the cowboy in question and it all came back. Parker had spent last New Year's Eve in jail after a brawl over

someone's girlfriend. His mom, a local artist and president of the Concerned Citizens for Cannabis Law Reform, had bailed him out. A few days later he showed up at the sheriff's office in Cortez with a bunch of flowers and a poem for a female deputy. The young woman had actually dated him for a time, sparking a firestorm of gossip that even found its way to Paradox. He was, the deputy told her colleagues, "real suave for 'round here."

As she and Tulley approached, Parker snapped to and smoothed his frosted blond cowlick, presumably at the sight of a female, even one with shorter hair and more muscles than him. He was barking up the wrong tree, but Jude had no plans to advertise the fact. This was not Boulder, with its liberals and GLBT picnics. This was southwestern Colorado, a few miles from the Utah border, less than a day's drive from Matthew Shepard's Laramie.

After identifying herself and Tulley, she sought out the most senior of the troopers, a rangy fortysomething who introduced himself as Henson.

"What have we got?" she asked.

"DOA. Hundred yards thataways." He pointed down the riverbank.

"Smells real bad, ma'am." Parker flashed a grin that probably worked on females who had never been to the big city. Even standing still, the guy had a swagger. "Got a clean bandanna in my truck if you need to cover your mouth."

"What I need is for you to talk to Deputy Tulley, here." Jude returned her attention to Trooper Henson and invited, "Lead the way."

They followed a well-worn track through silver-green grasses and gnarled junipers to the banks of the Dolores. The once mighty River of Our Lady of Sorrows meandered north between walls of stratified sandstone, through the open spaces of Big Gypsum, into Slickrock Canyon and on to Paradox Valley. 160 million years of history were etched along its serpentine progress, from dinosaur tracks to the ruins of Anasazi Indian villages, to homesteader graves and the poisonous dust layer that was once Uravan, a uranium mining town bulldozed when its cancer epidemic made the news.

Jude had made it her business to get to know the area since moving out here, and spent most of her leisure time exploring on horseback. It was a world like none she'd ever known, a far cry from D.C. Lack of water kept rapacious developers away, which meant you could look

out across a vast, natural landscape unsullied by human presence. Jude loved that. There was nothing like sitting on a horse high on a mesa, alone in this timeless splendor, feeling like a tiny speck on the ass of Mother Nature.

The track leveled out and she stopped and gazed toward the canyon mouth where a large cottonwood stood, impossibly alive and green in a barren sea of rock. From its branches, an owl stared at her, a rare sight in the garish brightness of day. *The harbinger of death.*

Jude shivered and continued along the riverbank, following the unmistakable hum of feasting insects. A few feet ahead, a squadron of flies hovered drunkenly around a vintage suiter split open to reveal what appeared to be female remains. The hair was long and the bloated facial features still vaguely identifiable. Jude pulled on some latex gloves and covered her nose and mouth with a handkerchief she'd pocketed for the occasion. The victim was young, maybe even a teen, fair haired and Caucasian, at least as far as she could tell.

Time since death was hard to guess. At a glance, Jude thought maybe a week, but submerged bodies decomposed more slowly than those left exposed, so it was more likely two or even three weeks. She did some math. The rains had struck six days earlier, so the body could not have been underwater any longer than that. Even with the August heat, the decomp rate seemed to be out of step with this time frame, which meant the killer must have hidden the body somewhere before he put it in the water. Poor planning, Jude thought.

Maybe it was a spur-of-the-moment killing and the perpetrator had to wait for an opportunity to travel to the dump site. He would probably have wanted to hide his victim some distance away from his home environment. Had he driven for a while, looking for a likely spot, or had he planned on the Dolores all along? He must have put the suiter into the river somewhere near Cahone, Jude calculated, for it to have drifted to its present location. There was no other direct access by road after that, until Slip Rock bridge.

She supposed it was equally possible that he'd dug a shallow grave right here in the muddy riverbed a week or so before the rains. The storm waters would have loosened the earth, and when the river started to flow again, the garment bag would have floated free. As a body dump strategy, it seemed like hard work and a high risk of disturbance, but maybe the killer had wanted this victim to be found. Either way, the body disposal seemed like the work of someone unpracticed.

Jude put a few paces between herself and the putrid discovery, and released the breath she was holding. Trooper Henson offered his Tic Tacs.

“Guess you’ll be wanting that hound down here,” he said.

“Not yet. We’ll have to wait till the forensic team is through.”

It was doubtful Smoke’s m would have a role to play. Having been in the water, the bag wouldn’t hold the killer’s scent anymore. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to see if the sniffer hound turned up anything of interest in the general vicinity, and Tulley was desperate for an opportunity to flaunt his K-9 handler skills.

“I better call in.” Henson was clearly keen to go where the air smelled sweeter.

“Sure.” Jude waved him away. “I’ll finish up here.”

She photographed the scene and wandered along the bank a few yards toward the cottonwood. The owl kept tabs on her, its demeanor one of vague affront. She was probably disturbing some rodent it was stalking. Her eyes drifted east toward Disappointment Valley and the adobe badlands skirting McKenna’s Peak. The mountain rose silver and conical above the pomegranate landscape. Wild horses still roamed its slopes, the last survivors of human encroachment that had condemned their kind to near extinction.

The Old West no longer existed and its scars were plain to see. Yet, in the eerie majesty of this place, the untamed spirit of those times remained palpable. With an odd sense that prairie ghosts were watching, Jude returned to the body and lifted the canvas so she could see inside the suiter.

The dead girl was missing her legs below the knees. She was naked and heavily pregnant.



Unfortunately for Bobby Lee and his faithful lackey, Frank, the Huntsbergers were so dirt poor they had to apply for assistance to bury Darlene. The only reward offered up was a mute nod from Mrs. Huntsberger when Jude fed her the standard bullshit about how her baby hadn’t suffered and they would catch the scum who did it.

“They got the best tracker hound in the state,” Clem Huntsberger said, as if there were a trail leading directly to the killer just waiting to be sniffed out.

Mrs. Huntsberger glanced nervously across the office at Smoke'm. The dog promptly plodded over and placed his big wrinkled head in her lap. As he gazed up at her, tears welled in the bloodshot perimeters of his eyes and rolled like crystalline pearls down his jowls. Overwhelmed by this show of solidarity from one of God's dumb creatures, Mrs. Huntsberger lifted her weathered hands to her face and began sobbing like she would never stop.

"I told you that hound was psychic," Tulley said as the bereft couple's pickup rattled off toward Highway 90 a half hour later.

"He's empathetic," Jude corrected. "That means he senses human emotions and reacts to them."

"Yes, ma'am. He does that too." Tulley reached down and caressed the hound's ears, an intimacy greeted with groans that vibrated up through the animal's throat folds.

"When you're done typing the parents' statements, keep on with those Samsonite dealers," Jude said briskly.

"Man." Tulley shook his head and peeled a fresh stick of gum, adding his last to the Wrigley's stalagmite growing from his ashtray. "That's another thousand phone calls. Shame her folks didn't notice anything before she disappeared."

"They're just plain decent people. Not the suspicious type." Jude wandered to the window and stared out at the Marlboro man. "Let's face it, no one 'round here expects this kind of thing."

Darlene had vanished two years earlier from the bus station at Cortez, aged sixteen. The Huntsbergers had reported her missing but the Cortez PD pegged her as a runaway. Her family had a run-down farm in Mancos, a two-bit settlement no young woman would elect to live in if she had a choice. There was only one witness statement worth a dime. A local drunk had seen a girl who fit Darlene's description getting into a white minivan. The police didn't set much store by his recollections and instead formed an opinion based on a girlfriend's statement that Darlene couldn't wait to graduate from high school and "get a life fifty thousand miles away from this shitheap."

It was the story of legions of girls like her. Darlene was not a troublemaker. She had average grades at school, helped her mom with the younger kids, and listened to Usher music. Her friends said she was shy and had never had a boyfriend. She made bead jewelry for a hobby and had a *Princess Diaries* poster on the wall of her tidy bedroom. Would

she have gotten into a vehicle with a complete stranger? Everyone the police had questioned doubted it.

Jude was disturbed that they had treated the case like a routine missing person inquiry when the circumstances seemed so suspicious. She returned to her desk and sifted through her notes. How far would a killer drive to get rid of a body in these parts, given the price of gas? Her guess was Darlene Huntsberger had been murdered somewhere within a radius of a hundred miles, probably less. An accomplished killer who knew the area well might have tied concrete to her feet and dumped her in the McPhee Reservoir to get rid of the evidence. But this guy had zipped her into a garment bag to keep his trunk clean and had disposed of her body where it would probably be found. He had also had the courtesy to place her social security card inside the suiter's ID compartment.

A thoughtful but amateurish sociopath who trawled for a random victim in a remote part of the state? Jude seriously doubted it. More likely, the killer knew Darlene. Which meant there was a motive. In her experience a motive meant a boyfriend or husband. It looked like their victim had picked the wrong guy to dump. Had she left Cortez with a man she'd met somehow? She didn't have a computer, so it probably wasn't an Internet romance. How would she have met the guy? In a small-town world like this, how could she have hidden a boyfriend from everyone who knew her?

Jude contemplated the manner of her death. Darlene was eight months pregnant. Her tongue had been severed, but not at the time she was killed. The autopsy suggested four or five months earlier. Her entire body was pockmarked with wounds described in an additional forensic odontologist's report as "ovoid lacerations consisting of two facing symmetrical arches separated at their bases by open spaces. Along the periphery of the arches are a series of individual abrasions, contusions and lacerations reflecting the size, shape, arrangement, and distribution of the class characteristics of the contacting surfaces of human dentition." In other words, someone bit the hell out of her.

Many of the bites involved flesh loss but, thanks to her immersion in the river, no saliva evidence remained. As far as the pathologist could determine, the bites were inflicted around the time of death, so it seemed probable that biter and killer were the same individual—a guy whose folks had not prioritized expensive dental work when he was a kid.

According to Dr. Claudia Spelman, the odontologist, it was rare these days to see an “irregular mesiodistal width coupled with rare convex labial rotation in #7 causing it to overlap #8,” otherwise known as the kind of teeth that made kissing anyone except your mom unlikely. Jude felt gloomy about that. If the killer had never had any dental work, there would be no record of the quirky fangs. Hopefully, this wasn’t the only time he’d bitten someone. It would be nice if they could solve this case the clean and simple way, sitting on their butts in air-conditioned comfort, getting a hit on one of the databases. But she had a feeling they would need to come up with some other data to narrow the suspect pool. The obvious starting place was the killer’s M.O. Unusual, to say the least.

Darlene’s sternum was fractured in two. This had been caused by a large object that had also perforated her heart—a metal spike of the kind logging protesters rammed into trees to prevent felling. Carelessly, the killer had left it embedded in her chest. But this was not the cause of death. Darlene had been silenced permanently when her throat was slashed ear to ear. The stake was a postmortem touch.

Jude wondered where it was from. The nearest logging protests were in the Dolores River canyon, one of the wilderness tracts now being opened up to drilling by gas and oil companies.

“With that fancy luggage and all, maybe he’s white collar,” Tulley piped up. “Bank manager by day, cannibal killer by night.”

“We don’t know if he ate the flesh he removed.”

“Then why not just bite her?”

“Removing the flesh could be symbolic to him.”

“The stake through the heart is symbolic.” Tulley chomped hard on his gum. “The rest is just sick.” His mouth stilled suddenly and his Madeira brown eyes flashed with inspiration. “Know what I think? This creep could be a Russian.”

“What makes you say that?”

“They got themselves a big problem with cannibal killers over there. It’s real common.”

You couldn’t rule out anything in a homicide investigation, so Jude gave the idea some room before she shot it down. “Experts think the cannibalism in Russian homicides is circumstantial, rather than fetishistic. The victim is already dead. The killer is hungry. There’s a food shortage. So...”

“They’re starving in Africa, too, but they’re not eating their neighbors,” Tulley said.

With notable exceptions like Idi Amin Dada and Jean-Bedel Bokassa, but Jude kept that thought to herself. “Yeah well, the Africans aren’t drunk 24/7. Think about it. Russia has the highest alcoholism in the world. Alcohol loosens inhibitions. Societal mores that govern human conduct lose their power. The individual fails to suppress his most basic urges.” She slowed down. This was not Quantico.

“I’ve been reading up on profiling, now that we’re dealing with a psycho.” Tulley indicated a pile of newly purchased volumes chosen from the FBI recommended reading list, also compliments of the tobacco industry. “Seems like the more you find out, the more you know you don’t know, and you never will know. So you wonder what the point is. They’d never put a guy like me in charge of a big investigation, anyway.”

Having met Ma Tulley on the occasion of the Smoke’m presentation, and having endured her dissertation on the hazards of book learning, Jude could understand Tulley’s reservations. He had already amazed family and friends by overcoming the academic hurdles that stood between him and a sworn deputy’s badge. There was no reason why he couldn’t make it to detective. She suspected low self-esteem was what held him back.

“Anyone can fill their heads with facts and figures,” she said. “But you can’t learn gut instinct. The good news is, you were born with that.”

Tulley’s ears turned cranberry. Praise made him nervous. “Why’d you leave the FBI?” he blurted all of a sudden. In the twelve months they’d been working together, he had never asked that question directly.

“It’s a long story,” she said.

“Ain’t none of my business, right?”

“Right.”

“I heard some things, that’s all.”

“What things?”

“Just talk, same as always.”

“Talk, huh?” What was new? A female FBI agent from Washington, D.C. is suddenly hired as a sheriff’s detective in Colorado and stationed far from the action in a newly formed remote substation with one deputy

## **ROSE BEECHAM**

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and a part-time secretary. The entire staff of the MCSO and the Cortez PD was mystified.

Every now and then, Tulley reported a new theory to her—she'd been sleeping with her FBI boss and had to go when the affair ended; she'd messed up a terrorist investigation so bad she'd resigned and the FBI had to cover it up; the job was too hard on females and she'd only graduated from the Academy because her daddy was "somebody."

Jude let the gossip circulate unchallenged. Truth was stranger than fiction. For now, she was keeping the facts to herself.