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## Chapter 1

It took hours for him to die; time enough to wish he had never read the book. His death should have been quick and merciful. Unfortunately, few murders go according to plan.

I didn't expect to be involved in another murder after rescuing my sister last year, but Fred and I seemed to be developing an affinity for helping innocent victims. This time the victim was me.

It all started on a beautiful Colorado spring day at my neighbor's annual barbeque in the hills outside Evergreen, Colorado. Fred watched Bonnie pick pieces of hamburger from the artificial coals of her propane grill. His eyes never left the burger. She was struggling with a spatula in one hand and a drink in the other.

"Our great-grandparents lived without it, so why can't we?" I asked while popping the top on a Keystone. I had let it slip that Xcel had cut off my electricity the day before. Seems I forgot to pay the bill, for the third month in a row.

Bonnie threw the burnt chunks of meat to Fred and continued. "They didn't have light bulbs or televisions, let alone computers in their day, Jake. Won't candles get a little expensive, and how are you guys going to keep your beer cold?"

"My cabin gets plenty of daylight and the fridge in my motor home runs on propane, so I'll train Fred to fetch the beer."

"Funny, Jake, but seriously, I can help you until you get back on your feet."

I was beginning to wish I hadn't mentioned my power being shut off. I knew Bonnie didn't have extra money to lend as she was a widow living on her dead husband's Social Security. "You're a sweetheart, Bonnie," I said and poured some beer in a paper plate for Fred before taking a drink for myself. "We're okay. I only let them shut it off because I want to write an article on living off the grid. Those back-to-earth magazines eat that stuff up."

She smiled and drained her glass before getting back to her burgers. "You're such a dreamer, Jake. You remind me so much of my Diane. You would have liked her. She was always lost in space, dreaming about writing the next great American novel."

One of the burgers came apart and fell through the grill. "Where the hell is Lonnie?" she asked. "Charlie paid him to do this for me."

"Lonnie Dean? Why did you hire him?"

“It was Charlie’s idea. Lonnie owed him some money and he’s letting him work it off.”

“Better let me do it, Bon,” and reached for her spatula. “He can’t get up this early.”

“The trick is keeping the flames low to let them cook slowly. You shouldn’t turn them over until one side is cooked. I also like to oil the grill too.”

“I’m out of cooking oil, but I’ve got some peanut oil in my deep fryer. Will that do?” She asked.

“No, don’t bother. I’ll manage,” I replied and lowered the flames.

Bonnie seemed relieved and went to the cooler. She opened a beer before retreating to a bench I had made for her a few years back. Fred followed, hoping for another handout. “You need to know that I wasn’t offering charity, Jake,” she said while Fred rolled over so she could rub his tummy. “Margot wants to hire you.”

I closed the lid on the grill. “Your sister wants to hire me? Didn’t you tell her I’m not licensed to work in Denver?”

She raised her eyebrows and looked at me. “You don’t need a license to edit a book. Do you? And you better leave that open. Jonathan told me the burner valves leak and not to close the lid unless I turn off the gas at the tank.”

I did as I was told, and reopened the lid. “A book? Oh, I thought you meant she wanted me to work on her house in Cherry Creek.” I bent down to see if I could smell anything. “Doesn’t smell like it’s leaking,” I said.

She giggled and took another sip of her drink. “It’s not a handyman job, Silly. She wants you to edit our father’s book. Margot said she could pay you a dollar a page and it shouldn’t take more than a few days. At least it will get the lights turned back on.”

“Your father wrote a book?” I asked, trying not to show my embarrassment at thinking she had offered me a loan.

“Just before he died. Mother tried sending it to some publishers several years ago and they all rejected it. They didn’t even read it. They just sent us their form rejections without a single comment on the book.”

I flipped the burgers and answered without looking at her. “Did she try an agent? It’s tough without one.”

Bonnie threw her empty beer can toward a trash barrel next to the barbeque, and missed. “That’s what someone else told her too, and suggested she get it cleaned up first. She let Lonnie try, but fired him after several weeks with no progress.”

She paused for a moment to watch Fred go after the beer can. “Not that he could have helped anyway. Lonnie only made it through high school because of football. I doubt if he ever read a book in his life.”

“What about Margot’s son? Have you asked him?”

Bonnie laughed and reached for a couple more beers, offering me one of them. “Jonathan’s way too busy losing her money with that roofing company of his.”

“Still working on this one, Bon,” I said, holding up my can.

Fred returned with the can she had thrown and tried to get Bonnie to take it from him. When she didn’t respond, he came over to me and laid it at my feet, daring me to take it. I pretended I wasn’t interested then grabbed it when he least expected and threw it toward the trash can. It missed its target the second time. Fred went after it again and stopped midway. He could have been posing for a dog show or calendar instead of listening to something we audibly impaired humans couldn’t hear.

“Your guests must be coming,” I answered, pointing at Fred. “He’s the best alarm system money can buy.”

Bonnie tried to set down her beer on the bench but missed. It fell to the ground and rolled out of her reach. She didn’t notice. “So will you do it?” she asked.

“Of course, Bon Bon, but not for a dollar a page.” I answered while checking on the burgers.

“I’m not sure Margot will pay more, but whatever you want, Jake. I’ll pay the difference.”

I tried unsuccessfully not to laugh. She looked so sweet trying to offer me money she couldn’t afford. “No, Bon. I meant I’d do it for nothing. All I need to do is run your father’s file through the grammar checker I use and then I can upload to a POD service and get you as many print copies as you need. Just pay for the copies.”

What’s that?” She was looking at me like I had just used a four-letter word. “I have no idea what you mean by POD. Damn beer and whiskey must be clogging my brain, but I do know Daddy didn’t put it in a file. He hated computers and wrote it on his typewriter.”

“Print on demand, Bon. You pay a small fee for each copy you order. Tell you what. Get me the manuscript and I’ll see what I can do.”

She got up to give me a big hug. “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you! It means so much to us.” The top of her head barely made it to the middle of my chest, allowing me to look down at her thinning gray hair. I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into when Fred began barking at a small caravan coming down Bonnie’s drive.

“Looks like they’re here,” Bonnie said, letting me out of her bear-hug. “Margot said she’d bring Daddy’s book with her, so you can get started right away.”

The first car in the line was an expensive Land Rover followed by a minivan, an old Ford pickup driven by a kid with red and purple hair, and a Jeep Cherokee. I knew the driver of the Jeep. Lonnie had hired me on several occasions to fix things around his house. He was already out of his Jeep and walking toward the Land Rover before its driver could get out, but not before the passenger. She was a pretty, teenage girl who had to be forty years younger than the driver. She wasted no time rushing over to the old pickup truck, but Lonnie didn’t seem to notice. He went straight to the driver and was on him like a fly on a turd.

The driver looked familiar. He also reeked money, and even at this distance I could see his slacks and coat cost more than I made in a month. No doubt, a box of the cigars he was puffing on did too. I flinched when he tossed it after getting out of the Land Rover.

Fred went after the cigar like the good retriever he was bred to be. “Well, ain’t that a sight,” Bonnie exclaimed. “Are you sure he is not part Dalmatian? He knows more than that bonehead about our fire danger up here.”

“Who’s the idiot, Bon?”

“Charlie Randolph and the girl is his granddaughter. I call him Chuck because the only hair he has is those few strands on his forehead. He reminds me of Charlie Brown. Daddy worked for him and Chuck’s father before that.”

Charlie Randolph didn’t look anything like he did in his commercials. He was the second generation owner of Randolph Motors, and a good friend of Bonnie’s sister. Bonnie had let on once, after a few too many rum and cokes, that she thought Margot and Chuck had a thing when they were younger.

By the time Lonnie and Chuck walked over to us, Fred was back with the cigar. I could see it wasn’t lit and never had been; maybe he wasn’t such a bonehead after all.

“Keep the mutt away, will you? Don’t they have a leash law up here?” Chuck didn’t appreciate Fred trying to stick the cigar up his crotch after he had refused to take it in his hands.

“Come here, Boy,” I said. Luckily Fred decided to obey me for a change and didn’t rub up against Chuck’s expensive slacks. “Don’t worry. He won’t bite,” I said, grabbing hold of Fred’s collar. Being a Wal-Mart shopper myself, I had no idea if the slacks were Gucci or some other designer brand I could never afford, but I surely didn’t want to find out by having to buy him a new pair.

Bonnie wedged herself between Fred and the old grouch. “Chuck, I’d like you to meet Jake. He’s the writer I was telling you about the other day.”

“You’re Jake?” It was Gucci slacks. “Well, that beast should be tied up.”

“Glad to meet you, Mister Randolph,” I said extending my hand. “Sorry about Fred. He must have thought you wanted to play when you threw your cigar.”

Chuck squeezed my hand like he was in an arm-wrestling match. It caught me completely off-guard for a man pushing seventy.

“So you’re the guy that’s supposed to get Margot’s book published.” His tone was sarcastic and a bit condescending. Apparently he thought his expensive pants, and his imported leather jacket gave him the right to look down on me, even if he was a foot shorter.

By now the occupants of the minivan had joined us. I recognized Margot instantly. She had the same frail figure and Susan Sarandon eyes as Bonnie. I didn’t have a clue who the man and boy were.

“Jake. I’d like you to meet Reverend Johnson and his boy. I see you met Charlie already,” Margot said.

“Actually, Carlos is my foster son,” he explained, holding out his hand and smiling. “I’ve heard so much about you, Jake. I understand Margot hired you to edit Ray’s book. Now there was a character. I’m sure you’ll get to know him well by the time you finish it.”

My hand was still hurting from Chuck’s greeting, but I accepted his gesture and returned the handshake with some trepidation for he was a big man with big hands.

“It must be a great read the way everyone’s talking. Chuck was just asking me about it as well,” I replied, grateful he didn’t squeeze very hard.

Chuck forced a laugh. “We wouldn’t be here if she would let me read the damn thing. Who gives a rat’s ass if my grandkids can write better shit? Don’t get me wrong, Margot, Ray could do a lot of things, but writing wasn’t one of them. Why you won’t let me see it before you pay some hack to fix it first is beyond me.” I could see he was just getting started. One thing I knew for sure is that a salesman’s mouth is like a running toilet — it won’t stop until someone jiggles the handle. Lucky for us, that handle was the girl he had come with, who now had her arms around the driver of the truck and was kissing him.

“Marissa!” Chuck yelled. “I need your help over here. Get my tank out of the trunk, will you? This mountain air is killing me.” It was my chance to escape and not a minute too soon. My arm was getting tired of holding Fred back who wanted to run over and check out the young boy who had come with Reverend Johnson. Carlos had

wandered off and was throwing rocks at an aspen tree. It was too much temptation for a Golden Retriever.

“I better get back to the barbeque,” I said to no one in particular, then turned to the others, “You guys can tell me about the book when we eat.”

“You’re doing the barbeque?” Chuck asked.

“Sorry, Chuck,” Lonnie cut in. “I kind of overslept this morning.” Then he turned to me. “Show me where everything is, Jake, and I’ll finish up for you.”

Lonnie went straight to Bonnie’s cooler sitting next to the grill and helped himself to a beer. “Long time no see, Jake,”

I picked up the spatula and offered it to him.

“You’re doing great, Buddy. Don’t let me get in the way,” he said while opening his beer.

In a way, I was glad he let me finish; grilling meat on an open flame is one of life’s simple pleasures. “How’ve you been, Lonnie? Isn’t Shelia coming?”

He raised his beer can in the direction of the reverend. “Left me last month because of that hypocrite. She found God all of a sudden. I think he’s giving her a lot more than religion.”

I began flipping burgers while talking to Lonnie with my back turned. “Sorry to hear that, Lon. I know how you feel.” I wished I had never brought up the subject. It hit too close to home.

“Yeah, it’s been tough since getting laid off. Over a year now, still no job and the house in foreclosure. Guess it was too much for her to watch everything go. Selling the Corvette to Jonathan was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“Jonathan?” I asked, dropping a burger on the ground when I turned too quickly. Good thing Fred had gone off with the pastor’s son or he would be eating it. “I thought he was going broke?”

Lonnie finished off his beer and threw the empty can on the ground. “Caught him when he just collected on a big job. He said he’s got more work than he can handle since that last hail storm. Even offered me a job tearing off roofs.”

I started to say something about the job and thought better. I knew enough about roofing to realize Lonnie would never work that hard. “Well, life goes on.” I was tempted to pick up the can and try for two points by tossing it in the trash can, but didn’t. “You’ll find someone else or at least another muscle car someday.”

“Not like that baby. I’ve had my eye on her since high school. She was a present from my Uncle Mark when he died. He had her since sixty-three and it was just sitting in his barn all these years since he couldn’t drive no more,” he said and walked over to

the cooler. "Maybe I'll just get a dog like you did. At least Fred didn't leave you when you got laid off."

I looked over at Fred playing fetch. I loved him dearly, but I would give anything to have my family back. "How's the job search going?" I needed to change the subject before I got too depressed.

"What search? All the good jobs went overseas and McDonald's isn't hiring, but I'll be okay and it won't be long before she comes running back with her tail between her legs."

I tried to imagine Shelia with a tail, but let it go without commenting on the picture in my head. "I wish I could help you out, Lon, but I'm sort of in the same situation."

"Thanks, Jake, but I'm not that hard up yet. I still have my unemployment for a few more months and I'm close to making a bundle off that poaching reward," he said before taking another drink of his beer.

"Poaching reward? What are you talking about?"

Lonnie downed the beer and gave me a false laugh. "What stone have you been hiding under? Don't you ever watch the tube?"

I felt like returning his smart-aleck remark by telling him televisions haven't used tubes for years, but considering who I was talking to, I let it go. "Reception up here is bad so we don't watch much TV." I hoped he wouldn't go into why I didn't have a dish.

"Someone's been butchering bears and elk and there's a five hundred dollar reward for information leading to their arrest and conviction."

"I'd hardly call five hundred a bundle," I said, trying to think of a way to get him to go away so I could get back to the barbeque.

"Promise you won't tell anyone if I let you in on a little secret?"

I held up my hand. "Scout's honor."

"You're supposed to use your right hand, Jake."

"Sorry. I'm left handed," I answered, then held up my right hand.

He looked satisfied this time. "I made a deal with the devil. It's worth a hundred times the piddling reward. By this time next week, I'll have more money than Shelia can spend, and maybe buy me a Charger like the General Lee. You know, from the Dukes of Hazard. One with a hemi that can beat the shit out of a Corvette."

I was about to ask him what he meant when Bonnie came over. "Are they done yet, Jake?" she asked, pointing to the barbeque. "The natives are getting restless."

“Damn! Those burgers must be charcoal by now,” Lonnie’s remarks had made me forget all about them.

Bonnie walked over to the grill to check. “Looks okay to me, Jake, but it’s a good thing I came back when I did. A few more minutes and Fred would have hamburger for a week. What were you talking about that could possibly be more important than lunch?”

“Just car talk, Bon. Lonnie sold the Corvette he wanted since high school and is going to buy the General Lee.”

She looked at him blankly. I expected her to ask what I was talking about. “You had a Corvette, Lonnie?”

“Hey, guys. I’ve got to use the men’s room,” Lonnie said and took off toward the house without answering.

I turned to Bonnie who was watching Lonnie leave. “Once a jerk always a jerk,” I said and went over to the grill. I proceeded to put the burgers on a platter, then reached down and turned off the valve at the tank before closing the lid.

“Shall we go dine, M’lady?”

“Go ahead, Jake. I’ll be right there after I clean up after you two.” She didn’t wait for me to object and started picking up Lonnie’s beer cans.

“Okay, Boss, guess I better take lunch to the hungry horde before we have another Donner party.”

Fred appeared at my side an instant later. His vocabulary might be limited, but ‘lunch’ is a word he knew well. It was far more appealing than any rock.

Everyone except for Carlos and the kid with punk hair were seated at a picnic table on Bonnie’s wraparound deck on the far side of the house and out of sight of the barbeque grill. Margot had her back to me, sitting opposite Chuck and didn’t see me coming.

“So Bonnie told me she would ask Jacob if he wouldn’t mind having a look at it. I hope I’m not wasting my money. I mean it’s not like he ever published anything for real, you know.” Then she must have noticed Chuck looking past her with a big grin on his face.

She turned, but couldn’t look me in the eyes. “Oh, Jacob. I was just telling everyone how wonderful it is that you have agreed to look at our father’s manuscript.”

“No problem, Margot. It’s the least I can do for Bonnie.” I could see just about everyone at the table ready to break out laughing; everyone except Chuck, who sat there with a smug smile.

“Is somebody talking about me?” Bonnie missed her sister’s remark when she came up behind me.

“Margot stuck her foot in her mouth,” Chuck said and smiled for the first time.

Everyone except Margot started to laugh. Even the reverend did all he could to hide it by covering his mouth with a napkin. Then he lowered his head and began reciting Grace.

He no sooner finished when Carlos and Marissa’s boyfriend showed up. I assumed he was her boyfriend by the way they had their lips locked together back at his truck, but then with all his lip piercings and tongue studs, they could have been comparing jewels. The diamond on her tongue had to be half a karat.

The reverend looked over at the boy with a disapproving frown. “You’re late, Carlos. What were you doing out there? You could have been stung by a bee.”

“Alec was showing me his new pellet gun. He can hit a pine cone a mile away with it.”

*So this is Alec, I thought.* I would have never guessed in a thousand years that he was related to Bonnie and her sister. Bonnie had told me horror stories about her great-nephew’s exploits, but never mentioned his affinity for punk.

“I ain’t that good a shot, Stupid,” he answered. “I said it could shoot a mile. These new models are better than a twenty-two, but ain’t that good.”

Carlos lowered his eyes, looking despondent. I thought he might cry. “But you said you could take down a deer with it!”

“Can I fix you a plate, Honey,” Margot said, looking at Alec. Her tone was soft and gentle. “Your Aunt Bonnie grilled some great burgers. Just the way you like them.”

Alec ignored his grandmother and went over to the cooler. No one said a word when he popped the top on a beer. “Christ. Don’t you have anything besides this crappy Keystone?”

“Is he allergic to bees too, Reverend?” Bonnie asked, after carefully placing her drink on the table like it contained a dangerous liquid that would explode if shaken. “My Diane would swell up like a balloon from a bee sting.”

“Bees, wasps, fire ants and peanuts, I don’t dare let him out of my sight without his epipen.” Reverend Johnson answered, patting his breast pocket.

Bonnie let her eyes follow the reverend’s hand as though being hypnotized. “A what pen?”

“Did you grill any onions, Bonnie?” Margot asked. She looked annoyed that Bonnie had interrupted. “Alec loves grilled onions on his burgers.”

“Sorry, Margot, no onions today,” I answered for Bonnie when I saw her confused look. The booze and too many people talking at the same time were getting to her. “Just the burgers and what you see on the table.”

“It’s used to inject a dose of ephedrine,” Reverend Johnson said as though Margot and I had never interrupted.

Margot put a couple scoops of potato salad next to the hamburger and handed the plate to Alec. He took one bite out of the burger then spit it out and threw what was left to Fred.

“These are gross, Grandma. Don’t we have no hot dogs?”

“Oh, dear. I forgot all about the frankfurters,” Bonnie managed without slurring her words. “Would you be a sweetheart, Lonnie and start the barbeque again?”

“Gladly,” he replied, looking directly at the reverend. “I could use the fresh air.”

I could see Bonnie trying to swallow, so I volunteered to get the hot dogs. “Stay put, Bonnie. I’ll get them.”

Chuck grabbed my arm when I walked by him. “Can you show me where the bathroom is while you’re at it?”

I waited for him to extract himself from the picnic table. He had managed to wedge his heavy frame between the built-in bench-seat and the table and was having difficulty getting out. Once we were in the house, I pointed toward the bathroom and started toward the kitchen.

“Down the hall and to the left, Chuck, and go easy on the toilet paper. The septic systems up here don’t digest it very well.” It was lame, but I felt the need to say something rude. It was the best I could come up with.

He reached out and grabbed my arm before I could leave him. “Forget about the damn septic system backing up, asshole. That’s not why I followed you in here.”

*Asshole? Who does this guy think he is?* I pulled my arm out of his grasp and stared at him. “Did I say something to offend you?” I asked.

“Look. Here’s the deal. I know you’ve been freeloading off Bonnie and this book deal is just a bunch of crap to get more money out of her and Margot. So after you get that stupid book, bring it to me so I can get a real writer to fix it. I’ll make it worth your while. What’s it worth to leave them alone? A grand?” When I didn’t respond right away, he upped the ante. “Okay, how about five thousand?”

It was all I could do not to punch him in his fat little face. I started to tell him off when I heard the explosion.

Then I heard the screaming.