

THE ANDERSON CHRONICLES, BOOK 5

SAVAGE MALICE

A
SHERIFF ELLIOTT
MYSTERY

KIT KARSON

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BOOK 5

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**FOR LEE AND GAYLA SKAW, AND
BONNIE AND DUTCH WEAVER
FOR THE HISTORY, SPECULATION,
AND FIELD TRIPS**

**THE HEART IS DECEITFUL ABOVE
ALL THINGS, AND DESPERATELY
WICKED; WHO CAN KNOW IT?**

Jeremiah 17:9



1

WILLOW BRANCHES TICKLED the back of his neck as the chill, midnight mountain air seeped through the fabric of his prairie grass ghillie suit. Mild discomforts couldn't drive him from his post.

Dim lights flickered over the crest of the hill in line with the county road. Well-armed with a loaded 12-gauge shot gun, and a .44 Magnum revolver, powerful enough to take down a grizzly bear, he was prepared for any possibility... or so he thought. What he wasn't prepared for was the overwhelming stench of rot that filled the air, followed by a blinding light. A powerful force pulled him from behind, and he was gone.



LONG SHADOWS HELD a feeble grasp on the night while warmth from the morning sun seeped into gravestones interspersed among ancient trees. Stone County Sheriff Peter Elliott stood outside the cemetery gates studying

the recently erected statue of a trail-weary cowboy scouting the horizon for stray cattle. He contemplated how much things could change in a century.

Anderson, Montana arose from an outpost for the vast Anderson Ranch. In a wild land with provisions scarce, and towns few and far between, neighboring ranchers, homesteaders, and passers-through took advantage of the outpost store. Ever the businessman, Charles Anderson, owner and patriarch of the family ranch, gladly opened his private store to the public. Soon after, he built a roadhouse and hotel, offering food, lodging, and, of course, libations. Anderson began with cowboys serving a budding settlement. Now, the town served them.

Lacking a pastoral meadow and not wanting to establish a cemetery in the waterlogged Flint Creek valley, early residents of Anderson buried their dead amongst the pine and fir of the Moonlight Mountains overlooking the tiny town. Plots were scattered amid trees and boulders, surrounded by wrought iron fences taking the shape of the terrain.

The raspy chatter of a magpie startled Peter out of his musings. He breathed in fresh morning air mingled with cinnamon and sugar, and remembered why he came. Cinnamon rolls still warm from Dixie's Diner filled a white bakery bag clutched in his hand.

Typical mornings for Peter included breakfast at the diner. This morning he found Dixie's usual place at the counter covered by an employee. Dixie, she said, was at the cemetery. Peter glanced at his watch and noted the date. He ordered cinnamon rolls to go, paid his tab, and drove up the mountain.

Toward the front of the cemetery, looking out over the valley, Peter found Dixie swaying on a wooden bench swing placed in front of a polished black-granite headstone. Rays from the morning sun danced off the

stone and caught in Dixie's warm caramel hair. Eyes closed, pixie face tilted toward the sun, she was unaware of Peter's presence until his German Shepherd, Zack, stepped forward and laid his head in her lap.

"What's this?" she asked, eyes still closed, hands ruffling Zack's fur. "A rabbit?"

"No," laughed Peter.

"A muskrat?"

"Definitely not!"

Dixie opened cornflower blue eyes and smiled at Peter. "I smell cinnamon."

Stepping around Zack, Peter sat gingerly next to Dixie, worried the rickety swing wouldn't hold his six-foot five, 200-pound bulk. Aged boards creaked in complaint, but held. Peter opened the bag and retrieved a sweet roll wrapped in wax paper.

"I didn't think about coffee until I was already halfway up the mountain."

"S'okay," said Dixie, stripping the outer ring off her roll, tossing it to Zack, and biting into the middle. "I appreciate this." She chewed and swallowed. "But, mostly, I appreciate the company. It's always a rough day for me."

His birthday and his death day, mused Peter. He studied the granite stone, as solid as the man whose grave it watched over. Dixie's father, the sheriff before Peter, was taken too young on the way home from his birthday celebration. A hairpin curve, a moonless night, and a moose too big to avoid was all it took.

"Have you heard from your brothers?" asked Peter.

"No, but... you know how it is. From the first lure cast to the last elk dressed out, they're too busy to pay attention to the date on the calendar."

Peter did know. Dixie's brothers, well-schooled in the crafts by their father, ran a fishing and hunting guide business. Peter reached to put his arm around Dixie and

pull her in for a comforting embrace when his phone pinged. *Dang!*

“Yeah,” he said as he answered, struggling to conceal his annoyance.

“Sorry to bother you, Peter,” said Travis, Anderson’s blond and buff county clerk. “I called over to Dixie’s and they said you were at the cemetery, but... well, Seth Geary called for you and it sounded important.”

Peter sighed. Expecting privacy in Anderson was like running down the street naked and expecting no one to notice. “What’s going on?”

“Not sure. The reception wasn’t great. All I heard was ‘dead’ and ‘poison patch.’ He asked for you by name and said he’d meet you by the gate.”

Poison patch was local lingo for a pasture known for a heavy growth of larkspur, a purple flower as pretty as it was poisonous. This particular pasture belonged to the Geary family.

“That’s weird,” said Peter as he disconnected. “I can understand Seth being upset about losing cows to larkspur poisoning, but not sure what he wants me to do about it.”

“Don’t you have deputies to handle those things?” asked Dixie.

“Usually. Seth’s a friend. Whatever’s going on, he asked for me specifically.”

“Sure. Hey, come over for dinner tonight. Bring Zack. I’ll grill up a mess of trout. The boys bring me more than I can eat.”

“Sounds great. See you then.” Peter whistled to Zack, and loaded him into the kennel compartment of his Ford Explorer. He drove down the mountain and north to the poison patch.



2

RUN-OFF FROM JUNE rains carved deep ruts through the backroads of Stone County. Navigating the rough dirt track leading to Seth Geary's pasture jarred Peter's bones and left Zack cowering in the corner of his kennel compartment. Both were relieved when they came to the gate where Seth stood waiting by his own truck, worried furrows creasing his usually friendly face.

Peter pulled over to the edge of the road and lowered his window. "Hey, Seth. I hear you have cow troubles."

"That's putting it mildly." He waved his arm over the hill toward the far side of the pasture. "Down by the creek. We should walk."

At Peter's questioning glance he explained, "I don't want to risk damaging evidence."

"Evidence? We aren't talking about larkspur poisoning?"

"You'll see."

"Sure," said Peter. He cut the motor, got out, and released Zack from his kennel.

Seth avoided the two-track trail cutting through the pasture, instead, leading Peter along the edge.

Over the hill, Peter noticed a herd of cows bunched up against the fence on the far side of the pasture. "Something's got them spooked," he said.

"Oh, yeah," said Seth.

Further down, next to the creek, the form of a black angus cow, head angled in an unnatural position, lay too still to be sleeping. A closer look confirmed Peter's suspicions. Death. In place of the cow's udder, a gaping wound spilled partially digested grass.

Zack moved in and began sniffing. Not wanting a contaminated crime scene or a dead cow-scented dog, Peter pointed away from the carcass and said, "Go, Zack. Sit."

He kneeled next to the cow and lifted the front leg. Underneath, a torn-away portion of hide revealed ribs and the inside of the throat.

"Dogs? Doesn't look like a lot of meat is missing."

"Yeah. But, Peter... this cow's not the worst of it."

Peter glanced up to see his normally calm friend visibly shaken, tears threatening to spill. "What's wrong, Seth? What haven't you told me?"

"Over here," Seth motioned him along the creek bed toward a grove of thick-trunked cottonwood trees. Several turkey vultures, drawn to the scent of death, circled overhead, catching thermals in the warm summer breeze. More dotted the upper branches of the surrounding trees. Peter shivered. As they drew closer, he saw the carcass of another cow under the nearest tree and, beyond that, yet another.

"How many total?" he asked, stunned.

"Three," said Seth. "Three so far." He led Peter further into the grove. "I stopped looking when I found this."

Past the third cow lay another lifeless lump, this one dressed in camouflage. Vomit gurgled in Peter's throat. He

swallowed, took a deep breath, and steeled himself for the horror before him.



WHO IS INSIDE THE CAMOUFLAGE?

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