

Skeleton Trail

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PROLOG

Gunnison County, CO – October 1933

Caleb added an entry to his journal. He placed it carefully into the cracker tin with the other evidence. He put the tin with its precious evidence in the hole he was using to hide it and carefully replaced the flooring. He walked out of the one room cabin, looking back to see if the hiding spot was visible before he headed to town for supplies.

Caleb never saw the gunman or felt the rifle aiming at him as he rode home later. He never heard the shot and felt no pain from the bullet that crashed through his skull causing his body to roll down the gully into the fast rushing shallow creek below.

The killer pulled Caleb out of the creek and took his wallet. He pushed the body over his saddle, walking up the trail for about a mile before he found a large round hole left by a falling tree at the edge of a wash.

He smiled like a kid on Christmas morning. This would save a lot of work. He dumped Caleb's body off the saddle into the hole, filling it with rocks and boulders. No need to put in dirt, critters wouldn't get around those rocks.

Once done, he rode back to collect Caleb's horses.

He shrugged down deeper into his coat as snow began falling, signaling the end of good weather in the Rockies and the beginning of another winter.

Chapter One

Gunnison County, CO – Present Day

Megan's blue eyes grew large as she watched in growing horror the rocky bank giving way under Bethany's horse. With the horse scrambling madly, the pair slid backward out of sight. Jumping off Radar, she threw his reins in a tree as the sounds below faded into silence. On hands and knees, she cautiously approached the unstable edge, when she heard Bethany scream. "Bethany, are you okay? Are you hurt?" She cautiously lay on her belly, extending her long frame, and pushing her head and shoulders over the edge of the embankment.

Bethany had kicked free of her stirrups to dive off her horse when she felt him begin to slip backward off the edge of the wash. Coup fought the backward slide, whipping his body around to swim with the rolling dirt and boulders, slinging Bethany's five-foot-four inch frame from the saddle to land on her backside in the rocks. Landing, she felt a sharp pain, her hips digging into boulders lodged in the bank. She watched Coup stumble down the landslide and saw him come to a stop, on his feet, not thirty feet below where she landed. Automatically, she rolled onto her knees, smacking her helmet on the ground, coming eyeball to eye socket with a human skull. Her breath catching in her throat, her mouth went dry in the split second before her scream startled Coup into moving further away.

"Oh my God! Megan, there's a body down here! Ewwwn!"
Bethany's voice, breathless, then wavering up to a shrill

shriek, rose up from the gully to reach Megan.

“What body? To hell with the body. Are *you* okay?” Megan inspected what she could see of her friend from above, looking for blood or obvious injuries. Breathing a sigh of relief, she saw Bethany looked to be only dirty with leaf matter stuck between the bill of her helmet and her forehead. She seemed more concerned with her discovery than with herself.

“I’m okay, I think. I landed where I have the most padding.” Her eyes went to Coup, who was walking over to a patch of late oats to graze. Relief flooded her. He seemed to be moving okay, but she could see some blood staining his back right stocking. Knowing he wouldn’t wander farther than the closest food, she looked up at Megan. “Are you going to lie there all day, or climb down here to see this?”

“Well, I don’t want to start another landslide. Does the ground look solid?”

“Yeah, I think Coup’s weight was the issue that caused the ground to give way. The creek’s been undermining this bank for years.” She looked both directions, seeing several spots where the upper ground extended over the gully by as much as five feet. “If you work your way down from where you are, on an angle toward the bottom of the gully, you should be fine,” she advised. This gully was going to be a tough one to create a decent trail across because of the constant erosion. She gingerly touched the small of her back and felt the growing welt where she’d landed against a rock. She knew it was going to hurt later. Looking again at the skull, she frowned. What had this poor person ever done to wind up buried out here with no marker? Sadness welled up in her at the thought of his or her family who had never known the reason for the disappearance of their loved one.

Megan stood up, took a deep breath, and began to work her way toward Bethany. She hated heights and steep spots, no matter if she was on foot or horseback. Bethany was standing by the time she reached her. They both leaned over the wide hole to get a better look at the skeleton.

“I wonder how it got here. That hole looks like maybe a bullet hole. What do you think?” Megan pointed to the smallish round hole on the left side of the skull, and then swallowed back nausea at the mummified tissue and cloth visible beyond the skull.

“This hollow looks like an old hole created by an uprooted tree. I’ve seen root holes larger than this after a strong wind.” Bethany pointed to bits of what looked to be tree roots along one side of the hole. “I don’t think this person died here, unless they took shelter or hid in here. No way could he or she fall so perfectly into a hole. Maybe they froze here in a storm after seeking shelter.” Bethany frowned in distaste and shook her head in sorrow at the thought of a wounded person trying to hide from a killer, but knew in her heart, if it was a bullet hole, the victim likely had never known what hit him or her.

“Yeah, I don’t think this boulder walked up from the creek bed by itself.” Megan hefted a five-pound rock located just inside the hole. “Now what’re we gonna do?” She looked at the bones with desiccated tissue surrounded by rocks nestled in the shallow hole in the bank. “I think we shouldn’t move anything until a forensics expert works the scene. There might be evidence in the hole with the body.”

“Let’s put back the rocks we know rolled out of the hole, geocache the location, tie a ton of ribbon on the trees above the bank and across the way, and start looking for the most direct route out of here to the closest road. The authorities are going to need a trail from the road to the

body, preferably a short trail. We can call them when we get back to camp,” Bethany suggested. She gave her friend a kind of lopsided grin. “The only good thing I can think of about all of this is now I have a name for the trail and maybe the ride I’m planning. This will be the ‘Skeleton Trail Loop’ and the ride can be something to do with murder and mayhem or the skeleton. Help me think of a good name?” she asked her friend. “Maybe hold it on Halloween or as a night ride and call it the ‘Ghost 50?’”

“Your mind is never far from endurance, is it?”

Megan shook her head and began to brush the dirt off Bethany’s back. She stopped when Bethany winced, gasped, and jumped away from her hand.

“Ouch, careful. I’m going to have a nasty bruise. Why don’t you go get Radar and I’ll finish brushing off my butt and head down to Coup.” She turned away from Megan with her hands lightly covering the injured area. “He looks like he has a cut on his back leg,” she said over her shoulder while she watched her friend climb back up to her horse. Bethany stood a moment longer, gently feeling out the size and location of the growing painful welt of bruised flesh before she cautiously climbed down to inspect her horse.

Above, Radar stood happily trimming the tree where his reins hung over a branch. He looked around as Megan approached. Damn, the day had started out so well. She frowned at the thought of the complications and the fact that Bethany seemed to be in more pain than she wanted her to know. Roger would not be happy that she failed to keep his wife from injury. Not that she could have foreseen the situation, but he had specifically told her to take care of Bethany; even though Bethany seemed completely capable of taking care of herself. Crap. She untangled the reins from the tree, unclipped them from the bit, and clipped

one end on the halter part of the halter bridle.

“I’m going to ribbon the tree up here before I follow you. No sense in making two trips up and down,” she called to Bethany. Taking the roll of orange surveyors’ tape off her saddle, she unwound several yards. She broke it up into strips and tied them all over the tree Radar was munching, making it look more like an orange Christmas tree than an aspen. Next, she led Radar to the spot where she would begin her descent and tied several strips of tape around smaller boulders before stacking them. She led her horse past the hole with the skeleton, marking a turning spot for the zigzag path down to the bottom of the gully. Looking back up the side of the wash, the orange tape screamed out of the browns of the fall and the earth tones of the rock. Yep, no one with eyes would miss this spot along the trail she surveyed with a grim smile.

Bethany waited with Coup at the edge of the dry creek. During the wet season, it would be deep, but at the end of summer, there was only one small puddle left to be seen. “I think we can make the trail go up over there. It looks like solid footing and for some reason, the wall isn’t quite so steep. I expect the Trailmaster might choose a different spot, but let’s start there because it’s close to the overall trail.” She pointed across the gully to where the ground slanted up at a less severe angle.

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go, boss lady. You lead.” Megan agreed and urged Bethany onward. Megan stepped her long legs and lanky frame onto the tall Appaloosa’s before Bethany mounted her more petite Arab gelding. She saw Bethany wince as she settled into her endurance saddle. “Hey, do you need a pain killer? I’ve got everything from Advil to Tylenol-3 in my trail kit,” She offered.

“I’ll take a couple of Advil. The stronger stuff just makes me dizzy and nauseous. The last thing I need on

horseback is dizziness.” Bethany managed to smile back at Megan, but her face was paler than normal.

Digging out the packet of pills, Megan handed them over. During the past month of living at the R-M ranch, renting the house once occupied by Roger’s uncle Phil, she had come to like both her new bosses and grown protective of them. Bethany worked hard creating the new pack station and guest ranch/campground, while Roger managed the cattle and horse ranch his family had owned for generations.

The R-B, which stood for Roger-Bethany, would offer wilderness trips for eco-tourists and trails for all levels of equestrians. With electric camping spots for guests hauling rigs with living quarters or regular RV’s, cabins for guests arriving without horses or RV’s, and horses for those without animals, it would bring new business to Riverview. They planned guided trips up the mountains and overnight or day options, along with a beautiful lodge for dinner, dancing, and gatherings. They were sinking a big chunk of money into this venture. The purchase of an additional two thousand acres at a land auction this past spring had begun the project. Then receiving permits from the Forestry to put trails for equestrians into the woods with the assistance of a certified Trailmaster had sealed the deal for the new project.

Bethany and Megan started the day at the campground, using Megan’s GPS to store the trail they marked with ribbon through the woods and over hills. Bethany wanted this to be about a fifteen-mile loop that would have overlooks and stopping points, but work its way back to the main camp. For the eco-tourists, it would be a daylong ride with lunch at a meadow. For the more experienced riders and the endurance competitors, it would be a two- to five-hour trail ride. They hoped to have it

marked out by sundown, but now with the need to locate the closest road, who knew how long it would be before they would be able to finish the loop. Her spirits drooped at the thought that the loop might not get finished before snowfall. Double crap.

At the top of the gully, Bethany pulled out a folded quadrant map from the USGS. The trail they had been following went off to the left. They were about seven miles from where they had started. “Did you geocache this spot? We’ll need to be able to give the coordinates to the authorities.”

“Yep. Got it safely stored. What does the map show?”

“Well, if we follow the trail to the left long enough, maybe three or four more miles, we should come to BLM 26. It’s not much of a road, but it would allow vehicles to park within walking distance.” Bethany pointed to the left, indicating the direction they should go. “Road access might also work in our favor, allowing crews or an event photographer access to this trail in a competition.” Bethany thought aloud, imagining competitors needing water for themselves and their hot, hardworking horses.

Following Bethany’s lead to the left, Megan stopped to put up ribbons of orange tape, while Bethany went ahead to mark further up the trail. Finding the closest road would give summer riders access to help if they needed it. Riders often overestimated the condition of their horses and then needed help getting back to base camp. Forest roads, even nasty ones, have saved many horses and riders.

“Boss, look up there. Is that a trail to the left? Maybe it goes to the road or a cabin on BLM 26?” She pointed at a faint Y in the trail marked by three stacked rocks followed by several rocks laid in a row.

“Hmmm, that’s possible. Let’s check it out for about

a mile. We come up with nothing in that time, we'll come back here and continue on this track. I think this might be the old trappers' trail used between the towns along the Gunnison back before the highway was built lower in the valley." Bethany put ribbon marking the junction low in a pine tree. Three ribbons marking the turn and another past the turn, almost out of sight to show the side trail. "Why don't you put the regular trail-marking ribbon on the right, where it will draw the eyes away from this junction? I don't want to divert riders, but I want to be able to find this trail again."

Megan marked the right side of the trail they had been riding, and then rode ahead on the side trail, while Bethany was tying ribbons at the junction. She put one in the evergreen tree at the top of the rise. Bethany passed her as they had been marking trail all day, going another distance up the trail before tying ribbon on the right side of the faint trail. Megan caught her and they topped a rise together to see a cabin nestled in the broad valley below.

"Look at that! There's a cabin down there." Bethany paused to admire the serenity of the scene.

"Wow! Bet we can beat you there! Maybe the owners have a decent satellite phone for us to reach the sheriff." Megan dug her heels into Radar and the gelding surged forward, carefully finding the trail down the hill into the low, lush valley before breaking into a soft gallop toward the cabin on the far side.

They were almost there when Coup caught up, put a nose in front of Radar, pinned his ears at the gelding, and flipped his tail. Radar, having a beta-type personality, immediately pulled up and let the alpha gelding take the lead.

"Coup has the best 'sneer' in this region." Bethany laughed at Megan's surprised expression. "He can make

just about any horse he gets next to pull up and let him go by, just by pinning his ears and lifting his head at them,” she explained, bringing him to a slow trot and then a walk when they approached the cabin. “I once won a race to the finish by that bit of horse interaction. Oh no! We won’t find any phones here, sat or otherwise. Look at the door.” She pointed to the cabin door. It leaned into the frame and hung by one old leather hinge.

“You’re right. This place has been vacant a while, if the debris on the porch is any indicator.” Megan agreed, noticing the leaves and dirt blown against the cabin wall. She dismounted from Radar and handed his reins to Bethany before she turned to walk carefully up the rough-hewn log steps to the remains of the porch.

“Be careful. I don’t want you to get hurt. If it looks like it won’t open, leave it, and we’ll bring the boys back to investigate,” Bethany warned, gingerly dismounting from Coup. “Damn, now my pants are starting to rub where they cross that bruise.”

Megan laughed over her shoulder at her friend. “Guess it’s going to be some time before you ride out again. We really should head home so you can get some ice on that swelling.” Nevertheless, she still lifted the door to open it and peered into the dimly-lit cabin. “Wow, it looks like someone just left it yesterday, except for the dust. Looks all ready for the owner’s return.” Megan’s voice reflected the awe she felt looking into this snapshot back in time. She could see the cot with the rumpled bedroll along one wall, the large pot hanging over the dead fire in the fireplace, the two-plank table, and split-log bench pushed against the closest wall to her, all waiting for the homeowner’s return. She sneezed three times in a row, wiped her eyes and nose on the back of her glove, and said, “Yep, lots of dust, but wow, there’s even still a book lying

open on the table. Wonder what was being read the last time this place was occupied?”

“I don’t think you should go in there. It could be dangerous. What if the floor gives way?” Bethany warned while she stood at the bottom of the steps holding the horses.

“The floor looks strong. Those planks must be at least two inches thick. I wonder if there’s a name inside the book.” Picking her way softly across the plank floor, she made it to the table in three careful steps. “Wow, it’s a Bible. Kind of gives me goose bumps. There’s a stub of a candle and a stub of a pencil here with it. Wonder what he’d been writing?” Megan touched the candle and pencil before her hand rested on the open Bible. It was open to the book of Luke in the New Testament. No telling which verse had been the last one read. Again, she got goose bumps thinking that here was something cherished by a person who had never come back to collect his things.

“Check it to see if there’s a family name or inscription. Bibles have always been used to record family events.” Bethany took one step up and decided to remain where she was when the tightening of the skin across her backside made her gasp.

Lifting the dusty book without removing her riding gloves, Megan mentally noted the page number before closing the volume and opening the front page. “This Bible is the property of Caleb Preston,” she read aloud to Bethany. “The first part is printed inside and the name was handwritten on a vacant line.” She fanned the pages to find the original spot in Luke to set the book back down where she found it. A single folded sheet of paper slipped from the center of the Old Testament to land on the floor at her feet.

“Wow, Bethany, there was a sheet of paper folded

up in the Bible.” She set the book down on the table, open to the correct page before bending over to lift the sheet and shake out the folds very gently to avoid tearing the thin paper. “It looks like a letter. The handwriting is much too fine to be written by the same hand that signed the Bible.” She moved a step closer to the door for better light, and then read:

October 2, 1933 Montrose, Colorado

Dear Caleb,

Thank you ever so much for the work you have been doing to find the killer of my husband. The new sheriff has been around asking questions about the “person” I’ve hired to investigate my husband’s death. From the way he was acting, I think that not only was he unhappy with your investigation, but that he also feels threatened in some way. He told me that I needed to let go of this search and accept that the villains who shot Tuck have long since left Riverview.

Caleb, I’m worried for your safety. If Sheriff Miller is involved in Tuck’s death, he can be very dangerous. Maybe you should quit searching until next spring. By then, Miller might no longer care about your investigation. I can’t stand the thought of you risking your life to bring Tuck’s murderer to justice.

Please be careful and let me know if there is anything I can do to help you. Tuck didn’t leave much, but I know you must be getting short of funds. I can wire you money if you need help to get through the winter. Or, maybe you can get your old job back with the Cole spread.

I’m doing fine and I feel the baby move often, so I know he’ll be born to carry on his father’s name. I just know it’s a boy; he’s so feisty, kicking all the time. I’ll be praying for your safety and I hope to see you soon. Maybe you can get here for either Thanksgiving or Christmas. My mother and I would love to have you as a guest to show our appreciation for all of your hard work since Tuck’s death.

Respectfully,

Angelica Tucker

Walking outside while she read, Megan used the bright sunlight to see the beautiful script. “Wow, I wonder if our skeleton is Caleb Preston. Maybe he got too close to finding the killer of his friend Tuck. Since the writer’s name is Angelica Tucker, we should be able to assume that her husband was called ‘Tuck’ because it was short for Tucker.” She handed the letter to Bethany. “Wonder what Tuck’s first name was. I bet we can find a history in the papers of the day, since we know the man was killed within eight months or so of October in 1933.” “Yeah, even in those days, babies took nine months, so if she was feeling it kick a lot, it’s likely she was in her third trimester.” Bethany looked over the paper in the sunlight trying to find any further information she could about the writer or the person who received it. “No envelope? Wish we could know where he received this letter. What town, post office, or maybe even at the Cole Ranch.” She turned the paper over again and searched for clues.

“I could go in and search the cabin for more,” Megan offered, turning back to the cabin door.

“No!” Bethany ordered. “I mean, no. That’s not a good idea. If anything happened, I wouldn’t be able to help you. Sorry, I didn’t mean to shout. It’s just scary with you in there and me out here.” She apologized for her outburst. “Let’s keep the letter to turn over to the authorities and head out to the road.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We could spend hours looking around this place for clues. Let me get this door closed.” Megan suited action to words, lifting the door on its single

hinge back into place, leaning against the frame. She stepped lightly down to Bethany and took Radar's reins. "Do you need a leg up?"

"I think I can still mount, but, I won't get off again until I'm home." Bethany muttered, turning to lift her left leg into Coup's stirrup. She grabbed his mane to pull herself into the saddle, settling into the seat, but keeping most of her weight on her feet to avoid resting her bruised lower back against the cantle, stifling a groan, even with all the care she took.

"You sure you can ride okay?" Megan asked.

"I can make it. I once finished a twenty-five mile race with a similar injury in the first five miles. I can ride, but I won't be able to move tomorrow," she confided, trying to keep the irritation from her voice. She knew the pain was making her snappish and didn't want to hurt Megan's feelings.

"Okay, let's get back to the main trail." Megan took the lead. At the junction of the trails, she dismounted and surveyed the placement of the ribbons to make certain riders would go straight and likely never see the side trail. "The turn is almost invisible. I doubt anyone will be up this trail before we bring back the authorities," she commented, mounting up.

After marking trail for another couple of miles, they finally heard a vehicle crunching on a dirt or gravel road almost dead ahead.

"Yippee! I knew the road had to be close. I am sooo ready to reach civilization." Bethany sighed in relief.

"Why don't I ride on ahead while you mark the spot where the trail comes out to the road? I can use my phone and call the sheriff," Megan offered. She actually planned to call Roger. They needed the trailer.

"Huh? Okay, let's get down to the road first, and

then you can ride up to the ridge crest to get the best reception.” Bethany agreed, while Coup cautiously picked his way down the twenty-foot embankment to the gravel road. He automatically turned and angled down the slope, while she placed one hand on the cantle and the other on his neck to balance herself against the angle of descent.

Megan sat on Radar at the top of the embankment, watching until Bethany reached the bottom, and then let Radar pick his way down the same slope. Radar had watched Coup and followed the same path without hesitation. Once at the bottom, Megan turned to Bethany, who was tearing off strips of orange surveyors tape.

“Hold on to Coup and I’ll let Radar canter up the hill,” she warned, and then clucked to Radar, letting the gelding set off at his sweet rocking chair gait up the gravel road.

At the top of the hill, she was happy to see her phone showed reception at three bars. Relief flooded her while she speed dialed the R-M Ranch house phone.

“Hello, this is Shorty.” Shorty’s voice was music to Megan.

“It’s Megan. Is Roger there?”

“Nope, he’s out in the barn working with that new youngster.”

“Okay. Here’s what I need you to do. Go tell Roger we need him to bring the two-horse trailer. Take BLM 26 to the left just before the county line. Follow it south-southeast. We’re coming out that way and will meet him. Bethany is in pain. She’s toughing it out, but I think she needs a lift. Oh, and tell Roger we found a body. From the GPS markers, I think it’s in the National Forest lands.”

“WHAT?!” Shorty shouted into the phone, causing Megan to hold it out from her face. “A body? Bethany’s hurt? You better give me something better than that or

Roger will come unglued,” he warned.

“Coups stumbled and slid down a hill. Bethany dove off and landed on her butt. She has a serious bruise, but insists on riding. She landed almost eye-to-eye with an old skeleton in a hole in the embankment,” Megan patiently told the man. “Think that’s enough information to calm him down?” she asked.

“Well, it sounds a dang site better than ‘Come out and get us because Bethany’s hurt and needs you and by the way we found us a body.’ Sounds,” Shorty snarled. “I’m on my way out to the barn. Don’t be surprised if he calls you.”

“Well, I’m headed back down the hill to help her mark the trailhead, so he might not reach me. Just get him moving with the trailer, okay?” Megan’s patience slipped and her voice sounded sharp with the question. “Sorry, Shorty. I’m tired and this day has been kind of crappy. Not your fault. Just tell Roger everything is fine, but we need him...with the trailer,” she told the man as she closed the call. She turned Radar back toward Coup and let him long trot back down the grade. She saw Bethany had marked the boulders with spray paint and walked up the incline to tie ribbons around the trees at the top of the embankment.

“Hey, you shouldn’t have dismounted. I could have done that painting,” Megan called to her.

“It’s okay. I want to walk for a while anyway. It might keep me from getting so stiff.” Walking back down the trail in the embankment, she was pleased that the ribbon was barely visible from the road. That would keep any nosy people from following the trail back to the body. She wanted the spot to be visible “if you looked hard on the left side.”

Observing Bethany’s handiwork, Megan said, “Looks good. If you know where to look, you can find it.”

“That’s exactly what I want. Geocache this spot for me and we can be on our way.” Turning, she led Coup up the road toward the ridge. “I take it you managed to reach the ranch. How upset was Roger?”

“Well, I haven’t talked to him. Shorty took the message to him out in the barn. I expect one of our phones will ring the moment we get reception.” Megan no sooner finished the phrase than her phone gave a half-hearted ring and went silent. “I expect that’s him. He’ll try again in a minute or two. Maybe by then I’ll have better reception.”

Bethany laughed, but it ended in a groan. “Damn, now it even hurts to laugh. That bruise must be swelling more. It sure is rubbing on my pants.” She finished just as her phone gave a demanding shrill ring. “I’ve got to change that ring tone. By the time I can answer the phone I’m already in a foul mood from the noise,” she muttered, digging out the offending item and flipping it open. “Hi, Honey. No, I’m okay, just bruised and sore. Megan said what? Well, she’s exaggerating. I can too ride if I wanted to.” Bethany glared at Megan while she listened to her husband. “Okay, I know the junction you’re talking about and we’re about a mile from there. If you’re just hitching up, we should be there within about five minutes of you. Just take something to read and wait for us.” She closed the phone. “I’ve got a bone to pick with you. You told Shorty that I couldn’t ride? What were you thinking?” her voice rising with the second question.

“Well, what I told Shorty and what he told Roger are two different things, unless Roger has a tendency to blow things he hears out of proportion.” Megan looked squarely at her friend. She wasn’t going to justify herself any further and if Bethany wanted to be angry, maybe it would ease the discomfort she was feeling from hiking up the road. Megan got off and took Coups’ reins so Bethany could move more

easily.

“Okay, I forgive you. Shorty does have a problem with retelling what he hears. You might want to keep that in mind and have him write down messages. Force him to read back what he wrote,” Bethany advised.

Megan snorted. “Yeah, like he would agree to that. Some people just have no good relationship with truth and unvarnished information.” She shook her head and walked on ahead of Bethany, giving the woman space enough to groan, if needed, without embarrassment.