

A KILLING AT COTTON HILL

Excerpt

I watch Loretta Singletary hurry up the steps to my house. She hasn't seen me on the porch in my beat-up old rocker where I often sit to catch any early morning breeze. Usually Loretta doesn't miss a thing, so I know she's on a mission. So as not to scare her, I start rocking and clear my throat. She jumps anyway, like a weasel has crossed her path.

"Samuel, you liked to've scared me to death," she says.

"Well, I didn't mean to," I say. "You've got something on your mind, otherwise you would have seen me."

"I do, and it's terrible news. Let me get a drink of water and I'll tell you about it." She opens my screen door. "You want anything?"

I tell her no. She steps lively down the hall, across the linoleum of the kitchen, opens the refrigerator door, and pours herself a glass of water.

I've got uncanny hearing for a man in his sixties, which is why I can hear every move she makes. Loretta doesn't hear as good as me, but she still has a brisk bounce in her walk. I've known Loretta so long I hardly pay attention to what she looks like anymore, but the bare facts are she's short and a little on the plump side, with gray hair that she keeps in tight curls like a halo around her face, and pale blue eyes. She always had nice legs, and they are still her pride, so she wears skirts and disapproves of women who wear pants. She's been a good friend to me since my wife died, though we're not as attached as she'd like to be.

Back out on the porch, she's so agitated that she jerks this way and that as she settles in. "You know Dora Lee Parjeter, lives out in Cotton Hill? She was found murdered this morning."

I feel like somebody punched me in the gut. Dora Lee called me last night, way after I was in bed—I often get to bed before dark in the summer, because I'm up so early. She was just about hysterical and told me she thought somebody was spying on her. After her husband died ten years back, Dora Lee was nervous being out on the farm by herself, and she used to call me, imagining someone was lurking around. I spent a number of years as chief of police, and some people never got out of the habit of depending on me to sort out such things.

After her grandson, Greg, came to live with her, Dora Lee wasn't so afraid anymore, so I was surprised a couple of weeks ago when she called me with the idea that somebody was sitting on the road leading to her farm keeping an eye on the place. I told her the same thing I always used to tell her: "Dora Lee, if you're still worried tomorrow morning, you call me and I'll see what I can find out."

That usually worked pretty well to settle her down in the past, but I'd had the devil of a time last night convincing her that she'd be okay.

Turns out she was right and I was wrong.

"I suppose I better go on out there," I say.

Loretta stares at me like I've grown a second head. "What do you want to go out there for?"

“Loretta, if somebody killed you, would you want Rodell to be the person trying to figure out what happened?” Rodell Skinner is the chief of police.

“I guess you’re right, but what’s that got to do with you?”

“I’ve got good sense.”

I head into the house for my hat and my cane and the keys to my truck. There’s not a thing wrong with me but a bum knee. Several months ago one of my heifers knocked me down accidentally and it spooked her so bad that she stepped on my leg. This happened in the pasture behind my house, where I keep twenty head of white-faced Herefords. It took me two hours to drag myself back to the house, and those damned cows hovered over me every inch of the way.

When I get back outside, Loretta is in the truck. “What do you think you’re doing?” I ask.

“You’re not going out there without me.” I know better than to argue with Loretta when she gets that tone of voice.

Heading out of town I ask her how she came to find out the news that Dora Lee was dead.

“Ida Ruth called me. One of Rodell’s men told his wife, and she called Ida Ruth.” Ida Ruth and Dora Lee are best friends. They get teased because they’ve both got double names.

“I suppose Ida Ruth will be out there at the house.”

“No, she was on her way to Waco for a church conference. She won’t be back until tomorrow afternoon. She was awful upset, but she said there’s no way she could get out of it.” The Baptist preacher may think he runs the church, but he just thinks so because Ida Ruth lets him.

Loretta keeps clearing her throat.

“Well, out with it,” I say.

“Ida Ruth says Rodell’s pretty sure he knows who did it. He said Dora Lee’s grandson probably got it in his mind that he’d be better off with her money than with her.”

“And we all know how much Rodell’s opinion is worth,” I say.

“That’s not all. Ida Ruth said Dora Lee and the boy had an argument last week.”

“That doesn’t mean he’d kill her.” I don’t like all this jumping to conclusions.

“Who else would have done it?”

“We’ll have to see about that.”

Cotton Hill, where Dora Lee’s farm is located, is a tiny hamlet roughly halfway in between Jarrett Creek and the county seat, Bobtail. It’s high summer and the drive out to Cotton Hill is pretty, the alfalfa thick on the ground, the post oak trees still green from the wet June we had. And the cotton is just a few weeks from ready to pick. It’s a terrible crop for the land, sucking up all the

nutrients and leaving it as depleted as if it had been strip-mined, but it makes a pretty sight as we cut down the county road to Dora Lee's farm.

I turn onto the gravel road that leads up to Dora Lee's little house, and Loretta crosses her arms tight against her chest. "You seem to be mighty familiar with the way out here."

"Been out here to see Dora Lee a time or two," I say.

Before she can pick at me anymore, we pull into the driveway to the side of the house and park behind three vehicles, including a Texas Highway Patrol car. Since homicides occur so seldom around here, every law enforcement body wants to get in on the action. All of a sudden, Dora Lee's murder looms up real to me, and I feel a flash of outrage toward whoever did such a terrible thing. When I climb out of my pickup, I wipe my sweaty hands on my pants.

There's a clump of people standing in the yard. Besides Rodell and one of his lieutenants, the Baptist preacher is there, standing with hands clasped over his belly and a sour look on his face. The two highway patrolmen are wearing their hats and sunglasses like they think a TV crew is going to come barreling up any second and they want to be sure they look the part.

Dora Lee's grandson, Greg, is standing off to one side scratching at a raw place on his chin. A scrawny youngster of about twenty, Greg came to stay with Dora Lee three years ago after his folks, Dora Lee's daughter Julie and her husband, died in a car accident. He and Dora Lee got on well, but I've always found him a little pleased with himself.

Everybody turns and watches Loretta and me walk over to join them, their expressions as wary as if they've been caught doing something wrong. The preacher's face is fire-red in the heat.

"Chief, how you doing?" Rodell says. I can smell whiskey on his breath, left over from last night. He still calls me Chief from when I had his job. That was in the days when it was an elected position. Now it's an appointment made by the county sheriff, Rodell's cousin.

Rodell's just under six feet, with rangy arms and legs and a big old beer gut that hangs over his belt. He's recently grown himself a little mustache that he's fond of stroking, and wears mirrored sunglasses so you see yourself reflected in them.

"I'm doing okay," I say. "I was surprised as hell to hear about Dora Lee. I wanted to come out here and find out what happened."

My eyes flick to the two patrolmen. One of them has a toothpick stuck in the side of his mouth. I can't see his eyes behind the sunglasses, but the way he's faced I can tell he's looking straight at me. I nod at him, and he turns away to confer with his partner, too busy or important to be polite.

"Dora Lee was stabbed, but that's about all we know," Rodell says. "We're waitin' on Doc Taggart to get out here."

I start to ask if I can go in and see her, which I bet he'll say no to, but about then another car drives up. It's the doc, and he hollers for someone to come help him get his gear out of the back. While they're all concentrating on that, I slip away and around the side of the house. Dora Lee's house is small, so I don't have far to go, but I'm hustling fast because I don't have much time to get a look at things before they shoo me out. As I walk, I scan the ground to see if I can make out

any footprints, but with this drought we've had, the ground is hard-packed and not likely to yield information.

I step up off the back steps into the kitchen and wait while my eyes get adjusted from the bright light outside. I slip the clip-on shades off my glasses and put them in my shirt pocket. When she died, Dora Lee slid down the cabinet, coming to rest slumped against it, with one leg at a cockeyed angle. She's staring straight at me like she's mad I didn't come out here last night and stop this from happening. I take off my hat and hold it to my chest. Someone, most likely one of the highway patrolmen, has strung some yellow crime scene tape in a rough rectangle from kitchen counter to a chair, to another chair and back to the counter. I can't imagine Rodell having the foresight to bring the tape.

Time was, Dora Lee was a good-looking woman with a fine figure. She's put on a little weight and her dark hair has gone to gray, but she still has those deep brown eyes that made her such a popular girl when we were in school together. I had a crush on her and went out with her a time or two. A torrent of water has gone under the bridge since those days.

Even after Dora Lee was a widow, I never saw her when she wasn't dressed nice. She needed glasses, but she refused to wear them, out of vanity, except for reading and quilting. There are those who think she put on airs for a country girl, but my wife, Jeanne, always said she admired women who didn't let themselves get dowdy.

I tear my eyes away from looking at Dora Lee's face and concentrate on the mess that's been made of the front of her clothes. She was killed before she had time to get comfortable for the night. She's wearing blue slacks and a white blouse. Or, at least, it was white. Blood has spilled down the front and puddled in her lap. The knife, a vicious-looking Bowie knife with a hefty handle and wide blade, is still there, sticking out of her chest. And there is more than one stab wound. Whoever did this wanted to be sure they made a thorough job of it. I don't think Dora Lee would have such a knife in her possession, so whoever killed her must have brought it with him. The blood has darkened, so the wounds are many hours old. A fly has made its way into the house and is buzzing around her. My stomach gives a little lurch and I look away.

For the first time, I wonder where Skeeter is, and if he set up a fuss when whoever killed Dora Lee came in. Skeeter is the latest in a long string of temperamental collies. Dora Lee never would have any other kind of dog. Skeeter should have escorted me around the outside of the house when I arrived. They must have put the dog somewhere so it wouldn't get in the way, but I don't hear any commotion like I should if he's penned up.

I take in the details of the kitchen, the dishes washed and in the drainer—two of everything, so Greg must have eaten dinner with her. Come to think of it, I never knew Dora Lee to leave the dishes to drain. She would have dried them and put them away. So she must have been killed between the washing and the drying. That could be a problem for young Greg, especially given what Ida Ruth said about the two of them having a fight last week.

I hear voices coming around to the back, so I take one more quick look around the kitchen, stopping when I get to Dora Lee. "Goddamn," I say softly, "I'm sorry as hell." Then I hustle on into the front part of the house. I turn left and go into her bedroom. Neat as a pin, it's plain but pretty. She made the handsome quilt on the bed herself, and her son-in-law painted the stodgy picture of her house that hangs over the bed. On the bureau there are framed photos of Dora Lee's husband, Teague, and several of her daughter Julie and her husband, the ones who died in the car accident. There's only one of her other daughter, Caroline, as a little girl.

I pick up a faded photo of the Grand Canyon with an old Ford in the foreground. Dora Lee was so proud of that picture. She and Teague took their honeymoon there. She always talked about going back but never made it. Seems like that no-good rascal Teague could have at least done that much for her.

I poke my head into the bathroom, but as far as I can tell everything is where it ought to be. Not that I'd know if something in particular was out of place, but it looks tidy anyway. Then I move on up to the front bedroom. I can hear Loretta in the kitchen giving orders about how things ought to be done. I'll bet that's going over big with Doc Taggart. He's a prissy SOB who thinks because he has an MD he's right up there next to God almighty and everybody ought to treat him that way.

Opening the door to the second bedroom, I'm hit by the heat. With the door closed, the air-conditioning hasn't reached in here. The room presents a challenge. Dora Lee spent most of her time quilting, and the room is packed with bags of fabric, rolls of bunting, and partly pieced sections of quilts. I wouldn't be able to tell whether somebody came in and rummaged around looking for something, because it has always been a mess. "Samuel," Dora Lee told me, "everybody's got to have a room they can just let go. I can shut the door to the room and sort things out when I please." From the looks of it, she hasn't pleased in quite a while.

I take a good look around. One thing catches my eye right away. There's a place on the wall where a picture used to be. You can see the paint has faded around where it hung. I wipe my finger over the area that was covered by the picture. My finger comes away clean, so it hasn't been gone long. I close my eyes and try to remember what the picture looked like. I think it was some kind of landscape, but I can't come up with anything more than that.

Somebody is walking as quiet as they can, sneaking up behind me. Probably thinks because I'm old I can't hear. "Sir, what are you doing in here?"

I don't turn around. I know it's going to be that highway patrolman with the bad manners. "I knew Dora Lee for a long time, and I'm paying my respects."

"I have to ask you to leave the house," he says. "This is a crime scene. I'm sure you'll have time when we're done to come back." He isn't unkind, just stiff.

"I'll be on my way," I say. To avoid the crowd in the kitchen, I leave by the front door. In all the voices I heard talking in the kitchen, I didn't hear the boy, Greg. He lives in a shed behind the house. That wasn't Dora Lee's doing. Dora Lee wanted him to live in the house, but the boy insisted on taking over the shed. It took him several months to convert it into a living space. I've never seen the inside of it, but Dora Lee said he made a right nice place out of it.

I walk back around the house and make my way to the shed. When I'm close to it, I see that it's been converted into a compact little cabin. I wonder if the boy did all the work himself.

I tap on the door and hear him moving around inside, and after a minute he opens the door. His eyes are red and his look is hopeless, a far cry from the arrogant face he usually presents. "Yes sir?" A pungent smell of turpentine wafts out through the open door, reminding me that Dora Lee said the boy wanted to be an artist, a claim I never took seriously.

"I hate to bother you," I say, "I just want to make sure you're all right. Can I come in?"

Greg looks over his shoulder, then back at me, and shrugs. He looks younger than his years, having yet to fill into his body. His jeans hang on his hips and skinny arms stick out of a ratty old T-shirt covered with colored smudges. With an unruly mop of hair, and his face long and bony, he's not an attractive boy. He steps back to let me inside, and I enter another world.

My wife, Jeanne, was crazy about modern art. She grew up in Fort Worth, where some of the best museums in Texas are located, and she was hooked on it. She dragged me to galleries with her, and it turned out I liked looking at art almost as much as she did. Before I met her, I liked pictures of bluebonnets and cactus, but she got me fired up about abstract painters.

So I have some knowledge of art, and I know the minute I walk into the room that I should have paid more attention to Dora Lee's talk of the boy's dreams. What is it that makes people think great artists have to come from somewhere else?

The walls are covered with his paintings, and they are stacked against the floorboards. The room is so crowded with tables containing all the paraphernalia that an artist works with—jars of brushes, tubes of oils, sketchbooks, tape, and piles of paint-smearied rags—that there is barely room for the single bed. As Greg sits down on the bed and gestures for me to take a straight-backed chair nearby, I notice that his hands are covered with pastel dust.

My pulse has speeded up at the sight of all this artwork that has been going on right under my nose, and me not paying a bit of mind to it.

"Sorry it's a little messy in here," he says. He darts a look at me and then away, to see how I'm responding to what I see there.

"All right with you if I take a look?" I say.

He shrugs. "I'm just learning."

Just learning. The way Kandinsky and de Kooning and Diebenkorn "just learned." Taking raw talent, and from the look of it, working all hours to mine that talent. He paints with the colors of what he sees right here in his world; earth and dark loam and rust-colored iron deposits; the endless varieties of greens of grass and leaves; and the whole palette of sky colors we get around here from stark blue to stormy grays and greens to sunset blazes. All the things I love about this part of the country. What he does with those colors is a miracle. Most of the work is small scale, and I think he could benefit from spreading it out a little on a larger canvas. On a homemade easel he's begun work on a pastel of storm grays with a faint undercurrent of rose.

"You're doing some good work," I say, tearing my eyes away, my heart beating hard. Greg is looking at me with kind of barely tolerant amusement, as if he can't imagine I'd know anything about what he's up to. I think of the tacky little painting over Dora Lee's bed done by Greg's daddy, and wonder how such a gift came of that. I despair that Dora Lee hadn't a clue that the boy was doing anything more than dabbling. "I'm sorry about your grandmother," I say. "You have any idea what happened?"

He hunches forward, elbows on his knees and shakes his head.

"Were you the one who found her?"

He looks up at me, suddenly wary, and I suspect that Rodell has already scared him into thinking he's a suspect. "No sir, Mrs. Underwood from the next farm down came over this morning. I heard her screaming." His voice wobbles suddenly.

I wait while he composes himself. "Your grandmother was proud of you," I say. "You know she was glad to have you here."

"I know."

I hesitate, wondering if I should tell him Dora Lee called me last night. Maybe that's not the best idea. "You didn't hear anything last night to make you think something was wrong?"

"Of course I didn't!" He gets up abruptly, and his fists clench. "You think I would have just stayed out here and let her get killed?"

"Son, settle down. I just mean that sometimes we hear things and we don't even know we're hearing something important. Like a car driving up into the driveway, or somebody laughing, or the dog barking. By the way, where is Skeeter?"

He shoves his hands into his pockets. "We had to put Skeeter down last week."

"What happened?" He wasn't old, so I know it must be something else.

"He got into something that made him sick and they couldn't do anything for him at the vet's."

"That's a damn shame." I'm trying to figure out how to give the boy a little comfort when there's a loud knock on the door. Before he can get to it, the door is flung open. Rodell strides in flanked by the two highway patrolmen. "Boy, you need to come with us," he says.

Greg's eyes widen and he steps back. "Why?"

"We need to take you down to the station and ask you some questions."

The boy looks around at his safe nest. "Can't you ask me here?"

"No, we can't. Now come on with us."

Greg backs up another step. The two patrolmen are poised to grab him, so I step up near him. "Look at me, son."

He looks, and I see a terrified calf.

"It's going to be okay. You don't have anything to be afraid of." I'm hoping I'm right, but I know that the reason Rodell barged in here to take this boy away was to get Dora Lee's murder wrapped up quick. He's not going to attend to the finer points of whether or not the boy is guilty. Greg is convenient, that's the important thing.

One of the patrolmen snickers, but I hold the boy's eyes with mine. I'm promising him, and I see the promise take hold.