

The BONE Shelter

CHAPTER ONE

Murder, Mayhem, & Monkeys

Elvis left the building at 11:15 PM and took a right down Pine Street, the silver Colt .45 resting heavily in the pocket of his white fringed coat. A light rain had begun to fall on that moonless night, and he adjusted the collar of his leather jacket to keep out the weather.

He made a brisk pass by Margarita's Hair & Nail Salon, hugging the building and staying in the shadows as he slipped by the Doughboy Bakery, keeping a watchful eye out for anyone who might be out for a late stroll.

Elvis took the next right on First Avenue, past The Liquor Palace, then down the dimly lit alley behind the storefronts, his shoes padding with a graceful ease over the cracked cement as he headed south toward his home.

At the end of the alley and across the street from Patton, Colorado's elementary school, there sat a green dumpster that had seen better days; its sides were rusty and the top bent in such a severe manner it didn't close properly, keeping it perpetually half open and at the mercy of the elements. This particular dumpster backed up to a brick wall, and as he passed by, without missing a step, he shrugged off the slightly damp white leather and gold-sequined jacket, wadded it into a twinkling basketball, and, with an overhead shot, tossed it toward the half open trash bin. It slid over the top and fell with a solid thump between the dumpster and the brick alley wall.

"Hell-fire," Elvis spat, his brow creasing with annoyance. No time to retrieve it now, but he'd been careful about fingerprints, and they weren't an issue. He glanced at his white leather gloves, thinking about how damn canny he was. Careful or not, he knew he needed to dispose of the evidence, but damn, he'd miss that gun—it had cost a fortune and had been worth every red-hot dime.

Feeling safe enough, and having put a good distance between himself and the necessary murders, he removed the synthetic black wig and his gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses. He shoved the glasses into the breast pocket of his red satin shirt, then spun the wig on one finger. He chuckled at how smoothly this evening had gone, and began to whistle. The percentage of simpletons in this town never failed to astound him.

Pleased with himself, Elvis did a little side shuffle and turn, his arms gliding out to his sides. He stood a little taller, his white bell bottoms whispering over the wet sidewalk. He kicked an empty Coke can a scant harder than he should have, and it skittered down the road, startling the black-and-white cat that dashed across the street in front of him.

"I hate cats," he mumbled under his breath, as it slipped behind a hedge and under a fence, "just fucking hate 'em." He spat into the gutter, and made a sharp right onto his property.

Two people were dead, and they deserved to die, he thought, as he keyed open the back door to his house.

"Time for a shower, a sandwich, and a cold beer."



Sam wasn't sure if today would turn out to be the best day of his life or the worst. Smart money was on the worst. He wasn't sure if he'd walk into his house and his parents would think he was the cleverest twelve-year-old who ever lived, or if they'd ground him for the rest of his natural life without the possibility of parole. The jury was out on that one. He bit his lower lip, clutched his English book to his chest, and frowned.

The day had started well enough. He'd walked to school with his friends BJ and Hank; they made it to class on time, which was amazing, since Hank had forgotten his science homework and they had to circle back for it. Sam remembered his lunch, which was a miracle in itself, even if it was only baloney and cheese. To top it all off, that asshole Trevor Becknor wasn't waiting for him at the gate to the baseball field with his fists clenched and murder in his eyes. Yep, it was a pretty good day so far.

Sam shook his head and sighed. The good day had done a mind blowing one-eighty and screeched its way straight into Shitsville.

The trouble began in sixth period English when his teacher, Miss Sharette, dished out the assignment for the day. She

was almost seventy-seven years old, and still teaching. She claimed to love her job, but could have fooled him. She either hated her job, hated her students, needed the money, or was just born with an explosive case of resting bitch face. She usually wore glossy pink lipstick and winged eyeliner that smudged in the wrinkles by her eyes and made her look like she was trying too hard. The pink lipstick would bleed into the lines around her mouth by the end of the day. No matter what the weather, she wore a mink coat that smelled a little funky, like someone had tried to set it on fire. Sam's mom said it was because she smoked Camels and that he should mind his own business, but that was hard to do when he sat about three feet from the coat hook, and the room smelled like the time they'd gone camping and Grandpa had accidentally set the tent on fire smoking a cigar. He guessed the coat was mink, but who knew? A lot of cats go missing in Patton, and there were a ton of coyotes in this part of Colorado. Who'd notice if a few dozen mangy coyotes were gone?

Once, on a boring Sunday afternoon, he'd looked up her information online. He'd googled her name, and Miss Sharette's Facebook page popped up. The last entry was 2013, and she had exactly five friends, all of them teachers. It looked as if she had no relatives, no kids, no husband, no life, at least as far as Facebook was concerned. Her profile picture was a meme that said, "Teachers! Changing the World One Child at a Time!" Sam thought she needed to click the heels of her sensible shoes together and catch the first rocket to the sun, especially now that she was all but dragging him down the hall to the office. He didn't like her, and he was pretty sure she didn't like him either, although he had once heard her tell his parents at a parent-teacher conference that she was hard on him because she knew he had potential. Yet here he was, standing in front of the principal's office waiting for judgment day.

The assignment for sixth period English was to write a one- or two-paragraph epitaph for a non-human object or thing. Dumb, but easy enough. Sam cursed inwardly at his lack of foresight. Why hadn't he picked a rock, or Jupiter, or a baked potato? He smacked himself on the forehead and tipped his head back with an exasperated grunt. He'd thought he was so smart to have picked a monkey as his subject. In his twelve-year-old boy's mind he had felt the creative juices begin to bubble and churn until he became excited about the assignment. He would write an epitaph for a monkey and compare it to a penis, the monkey-penis still having a bit of a life of its own. In hindsight, he should have known it was inappropriate, but at the time he'd found the idea hilarious and brilliant.

Sam groaned, stopped in front of the principal's office, and hesitated. He had been so sure his ingenious, out-of-the-box thinking would earn him a great grade, and now here he was marching into the lion's den with his slightly smoky-smelling English teacher's hand on his shoulder.

Miss Sharette opened the door, gestured Sam through it, walked straight past the secretary, who looked at them over her half-moon glasses, and barged into Mr. Morrison's office. She thrust his creative handiwork at principal Morrison. "Read this, Fred."

Mr. Morrison, who looked as if he had no more shits left to give, took the papers from her outstretched hand and sighed. He put on his reading glasses, sighed some more—this time with increased dramatic gusto—and then began to read.

Sam could see the corners of his mouth twitch, and his teeth bite into the side of his cheek. As far as Sam knew, Mr. Morrison never cracked a smile in his life, let alone a laugh. It was as if he'd been born without a personality gene. Was this little smirk a good sign? Sam felt a small tingle of hope.

Fred Morrison finished reading. It didn't take him long, since the masterpiece Sam had written barely an hour ago was only two paragraphs long.

Principal Morrison sat the papers on the desk along with his glasses. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Miss Sharette," he bemoaned, "it seems to me that Sam has spelled everything correctly." Sam saw a muscle in his cheek twitch. "I don't see a real problem other than his essay being a bit, eh, off-color."

He looked up at Miss Sharette who obviously was not pleased with his response.

"We have bigger fish to fry," he concluded, "than a primate phallus don't we?"

Miss Sharette gave a phlegmy snort and snatched up the papers. "I want to call his parents and read this vulgar essay to them."

There was no question that Sam's mom would answer the phone. She had a decent sense of humor, but you never knew if she was in a good mood. She usually was. She had been when he left for school that morning. Sometimes though, she was in a pissy mood, like when the book she was writing wasn't going the way she wanted, and then little things set her off. Maybe she was day drinking. That'd be a good thing, and Sam said a little prayer to the god of box wine.

Mr. Morrison pushed the phone across the desk and waved his hand in a go-right-ahead gesture, and Miss Sharette began poking in Sam's phone number on the old landline with her red correction pen, like a miniature game of whack-a-mole. Why the hell did Mr. Morrison still have that old phone, anyway? It had a curly cord and everything. The kids called her pen The Red Pen of Shame, since she seemed to get some weird thrill out of making fancy curlicue Fs on pupils' papers, and now she was using it to call his mom and read her a story about a monkey pecker.

“My mom’s gonna laugh,” Sam muttered under his breath.

“Hush, Sam,” Mr. Morrison said, his teeth still biting the inside of his cheek, making his face look as if his mouth was more on one side than the other. “The phantom smile was still on his face, and Sam held his breath. He seemed to actually be enjoying this. Principal Morrison was enjoying something.

“Mrs. Hamlin,” Sam’s teacher, her voice terse, said when his mom picked up, “This is Miss Sharette, Samuel’s English teacher. I have him in the office.” Sam could hear his mother’s mumbled voice come over the phone from where he sat. “No, Sam’s fine,” she looked directly at him, “physically. But he wrote a troubling paper for his assignment today, and I thought you should hear it.” Sam’s mom mumbled some more, but he couldn’t make out what she was saying.

Miss Sharette began a full-on dramatical reading, using the hand that wasn’t holding the phone for emphasis; the red pen of shame rolled off of Mr. Morrison’s desk onto the floor and pinged the side of the metal trash can.

“Peter, the monkey lay stiff in his bed, still throbbing...”

A louder mumble came through the other end of the phone. Sam wasn’t sure, but he thought he could make out the word, “Seriously?”

“...By the time the police arrived, the monkey was flaccid, pale and drooling. The veins on his head were standing out and were purple”

More mumbling along, with a very loud, “Oh my God!”

Sam hung his head, his shoulders hitching as he held back laughter. It wasn’t that his stupid story was so funny; it really wasn’t. What was funny was that his English teacher was being so stinking serious. As if she were Abraham Lincoln reading the Gettysburg Address.

Miss Sharette continued, “It was a schlong way to the cemetery and they rented the Oscar Meyer Weinermobile as a hearse.”

Mr. Morrison turned his face toward the wall and away from them.

Miss Sharette ended with a flourish: “No one came to the monkey’s funeral,” she said, with a final, dramatic pause. “All of his friends thought he was a giant dick.”

Miss Sharette pulled the phone from her ear and Sam could hear his mother laughing. Not just normal laughing, but barking. His mom was barking! Sam could hear Mr. Tinkles, their pet dachshund, howling in the background like a renegade fire truck, most likely thinking his mother was having some kind of medical emergency. Yep, Mom was day drinking, thank God.

“I told you my mom would laugh!” he said, instantly regretting it. Sometimes it took his brain a while to catch up with his mouth, but Sam knew his mom, and his mom thought weird stuff was funny—and this was as weird as it got.

The principal looked from Sam to Miss Sharette to the phone, where loud braying laughter was still spraying out sounding like a donkey stuck in an electric fence. Mr. Tinkles howled on; Sam could picture him, his head thrown back and his round wiener dog eyes rolling around in their sockets, his mouth a little O at the end of his long snout. Sam’s mom was out of control, she was off the rails, she was day drinking! Sam loved his mom so damn much.

Mr. Morrison coughed, covered his mouth, hiccupped, and swallowed a strangled laugh.

Miss Sharette slammed down the phone hard enough to make a framed photograph of Mr. Morrison’s family fall over. Sam was pretty sure his mom didn’t even notice she’d been cut off.

Mr. Morrison rested his elbows on his desk and laid his head in his hands. “Sam, I think you’ll be needing to take tomorrow off to think about all of—” Mr. Morrison made a circular gesture with his hands— “this.” He righted the photo of his wife and family and continued, “There’s only one period left, so gather your things, get your stuff from your locker, and head out. I’ll need a note from you mom on Monday morning.” Principal Morrison placed his readers back on his nose, ran his hands through his thinning hair, and pointed toward the door. By the smirk on his face, Sam was pretty sure he didn’t trust himself to say another word.

Miss Sharette harrumphed, turned on the heel of her sensible shoes, and stormed out.

“You can go, Sam,” Mr. Morrison wheezed. “Oh, and ‘flaccid’ is a pretty big word for a twelve-year-old.”

Sam smiled. “Thanks sir,” he said, heading to the door. “Sorry about everything.”

Mr. Morrison turned his desk chair to face the wall and nodded without saying anything.

Sam left, quietly closing the door behind himself. As soon as the door clicked shut, he heard Mr. Morrison laugh so hard he thought the frosted glass Principal’s Office part of the door would crack and explode like a piano dropped from a second story window. Sam gave a triumphant thumbs-up to the bewildered secretary, opened the outer office door, and headed out to his locker. He was pretty sure he’d be a legend in the teacher’s lounge by the end of the day.



Sam’s locker was next to the boys’ bathroom across from the gym on the first floor. The school was built in the 1940’s, with rich, dark woodwork and much newer drop ceilings with God-knew-what behind them; Sam always envisioned spiders and cobwebs and some feral, quasi-human ex janitor with sharp yellow teeth that fed off the blood of the

younger kids who didn't do their homework. That was the kind of messed up thing that haunted his dreams sometimes—maybe he was more like his mom than he thought, and would write his own books someday. Someone in the seventies had thought that painting the lockers bright, electric green was a good idea. The paint was chipped in places, and the dull silver of the original lockers showed through. The color was probably more appropriate for the era it was built, but people in the seventies likely thought lime green would brighten the place up. Most conceivably some old hippies that smelled like weed, or someone who owned a Pinto that hadn't exploded yet. Sam had seen YouTube videos, and those cars were ugly as a dog's butt. Who ever thought they were a good idea? He imagined businessmen in suits sitting around a table trying to design the next big thing in automobiles, and some guy yells, "Hey! Let's make a cheap-ass, homely car that'll take out a whole neighborhood if you run into the back of it with a folding baby stroller!" Anyway, they were obnoxious, old, and green, kind of like Miss Sharette. Beneath the gills of Sam's locker was a section of chipped paint shaped like a pig with five legs and a top hat—at least that was pretty darn cool.

Sam spun the combination into the lock—12-21-48, Samuel L. Jackson's birthday. Sam was a big fan. He knew Samuel L. was an old fart now, but it didn't matter, Sam loved his old movies and watched them over and over when his parents weren't home. Samuel B. loved everything about his namesake, Samuel L., including, much to the dismay of his parents, all his awe-inspiring language. Face it, sometimes "motherfucker" was the only word that worked, and it slipped out before he had time to think. Inside Sam's locker were at least a hundred pieces of chewed gum of various colors and sizes, a photo of Samuel L. Jackson's Snakes on a Plane poster that he'd printed out at home, and a picture of his dog, Mr. Tinkles the dachshund, in a birthday hat.

Sam shoved the books he'd be needing into his backpack, added one more piece of chewed gum to the locker door, closed it, and gave the lock a spin. As he turned to leave, Trevor Becknor, the dumb ass he'd avoided this morning by the field, was coming out of the boys' lavatory. Sam could smell smoke, sweat, and unwashed denim as he approached. "Hey asshole!" Trevor hollered at him, his voice echoing off the rows of lockers as he sauntered over. "What the hell are you doing in the hall between classes?"

Trevor was taller than all the kids in fifth grade; he'd flunked second grade and then fourth. There was a huge difference in size between twelve and fourteen, and the jerk used it to his advantage every chance he got.

Trevor lived with his mom and stepdad on the south side of town, across the street from a store called Dan's Used Furniture and Supreme Meats. His temper was legendary, and most of the kids stayed clear of him; no one really knew him well, as far as Sam was aware. Sam's mom once said Trevor was angry at the world due to his living conditions. All Sam knew about Trevor was that his mom had shot his real dad dead in the street after a big argument. The story grew to legendary proportions over the years, and Sam imagined her shooting his dad in the middle of the road blowing smoke off the gun's muzzle, and twirling it three times before returning it to its holster. He supposed seeing your mom shoot the shit out of your dad would screw anyone up. Sam could appreciate being screwed up by your circumstances, but he didn't appreciate being the screwed up kid's punching bag. Sam had no idea why Trevor had singled him out, so he stayed clear of the older boy's path, and his fists.

"I'm going home," Sam said, shoving the last of his books into his backpack, "family emergency."

Trevor grabbed a fistful of Sam's Dr. Pepper shirt.

"Why?"

"Family emergency!"

Trevor gave him a shake. "Bullshit. Tell me the truth," he snarled, spittle collecting in the corners of his mouth. Sam felt the back of his shirt rip.

The door to the gym opened and out came coach Stephens. Trevor loosened his grasp on Sam's shirt.

"You boys should be in class," Coach said, looking from one to the other.

"Principal Morrison sent me home, Coach, I'm just getting my books."

Trevor glared at him. He'd caught him in a lie.

"Trevor, get back to class, I sent you to the lav twenty minutes ago. Head out, go."

Trevor headed back toward the gym, turned, walked backward glaring at Sam, then pointed two fingers at his eyes and then toward Sam, in the universal I'm watching you gesture. He made a slicing motion across his throat. Sam knew exactly what that meant too.

Trevor punched open the double doors to the gym, and the sound of screeching tennis shoes on the polished gym floor, and the dribble of a basketball filled the hallway.

"Best head out now, Sam," said coach Stephens with a grin. "I hope you're not in too much trouble over the monkey thing."

"Me too," Sam said, shaking his head. "Thanks." Wow, news traveled fast.



Sam headed out the school's double doors and down the stairs, found his bike parked in the bike rack, knelt and spun in the lock's combination, which was also Samuel L. Jackson's birthday. "Samuel L Jackson wouldn't take shit like this from some idiot named Trevor," he whispered to himself, as he stowed the lock in his backpack.

Sam threw a leg over his bike and pedaled off through the parking lot. He had ten dollars in his pocket from his allowance and he was going to stop and get a soda and some candy on the way home. "I need a drink," he muttered. His mom said that all the time when she had a bad day. Sam squeezed his eyes closed for an instant. Jesus, he was turning into his mother. What a terrifying idea.

The thought of soda and candy brightened him a bit, and he knew he would need some sugar-induced courage to face his parents. He figured his mom was probably still laughing, but that would wear off by the time he got home, and she'd certainly called his dad. Sam pedaled quickly through the parking lot, turned the corner before leaving the school grounds, and threw a mighty middle finger in the direction of Miss Sharette's old black Cadillac.

"Shit."

She was standing right next to the damn thing looking like Smokey the Bear in pink lipstick. Sam peeled out without looking around. He could feel Miss Sharette's eyes burning holes into his back and he pedaled quickly toward town, his feet a blur of motion.

END OF CHAPTER ONE