



Cold Case at Cobra Creek (Cold Case Series Book 3)

By Rita Herron



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A Native American tracker makes it his mission to bring a missing child home, just in time for Christmas...

After two years, Sage Freeport had all but given up hope of seeing her little boy again...until she met Dugan Graystone. They shared a disdain for local law enforcement, the same folks who'd hindered Sage's efforts to find her son. As an expert tracker, the broad-shouldered Native American was sure he could find the child—even if he had to leave Texas to do it. Spending time with Sage, watching as she broke down every time a lead didn't pan out, Dugan worked harder than he ever had before. Now, with Christmas just days away, Dugan knew Sage trusted him to give her the greatest gift of all: bringing Benji home....



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Award-winning author Rita Herron wrote her first book when she was twelve, but didn't think real people grew up to be writers. Now she writes so she doesn't have to get a real job. A former kindergarten teacher and workshop leader, she traded storytelling to kids for writing romance. She lives in Georgia with her own romance hero. She loves to hear from readers, so please visit her website, www.ritaherron.com.

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Dugan Graystone did not trust Sheriff Billy Gandt worth a damn.

Gandt thought he owned the town and the people in it and made no bones about the fact that men like Dugan, men who weren't white, weren't fit for office and should stay out of his way.

Gandt had even tried to stop Dugan from taking on this search-and-rescue mission, saying he could use his own men. But the families of the two lost hikers had heard about Dugan's reputation as an expert tracker and insisted he spearhead the efforts to find the young men.

Dugan rode his stallion across the wilderness, scrutinizing every bush and tree, along with the soil, for footprints and other signs that someone had come this way. A team of searchers had spread across the miles of forests looking for the missing men, but Dugan had a sixth sense, and it had led him over to Cobra Creek, miles from where Gandt had set up base camp for the volunteer workers involved in the search.

Dammit, he hated Gandt. He'd run against him for sheriff and lost—mainly because Gandt bought votes. But one day he'd put the bastard in his place and prove that beneath that good-old-boy act, Gandt was nothing but a lying, cheating coward.

Born on the reservation near Cobra Creek, Dugan had Native American blood running through his veins. Dugan fought for what was right.

And nothing about Gandt was right.

Money, power and women were Gandt's for the taking. And crime—if it benefited Billy—could be overlooked for a price.

Though Dugan owned his own spread, on the side, he worked as a P.I. His friend, Texas Ranger Jaxon Ward, was looking into Gandt's financials, determined to catch the man at his own game.

The recent flooding of the creek had uprooted bushes and trees, and washed up debris from the river that connected to the creek. Dugan noted an area that looked trampled, as if a path had been cut through the woods.

He guided his horse to a tree and dismounted, then knelt to examine the still-damp earth. A footprint in the mud?

Was it recent?

He noticed another, then some brush flattened, leading toward the creek. Dugan's instincts kicked in, and he shone his flashlight on the ground and followed the indentations.

Several feet away, he saw another area of ground that looked disturbed. Mud and sticks and...something else.

Bones.

Maybe an animal's?

He hurried over to examine them, his pulse pounding. No...that was a human femur. And a finger. Human bones.

And judging from the decomp, they had been there too long to belong to one of the two teenagers who'd gone missing.

The radio at his belt buzzed and crackled, and he hit the button to connect.

"We found the boys," Jaxon said. "A little dehydrated, but they're fine."

Dugan removed his Stetson and wiped sweat from his forehead. "Good. But I need the coroner over here at Cobra Creek."

"What?"

"I found bones," Dugan said. "Looks like they've been here a couple of years."

A foreboding washed over Dugan. Two years ago, a man named Ron Lewis had supposedly died in a car crash near here. Sage Freeport's son had been with him at the time.

The man's body and her son's had never been found.

Could these bones belong to Ron Lewis, the man who'd taken her son?

Sage set a place at the breakfast bar for Benji, then slid a pancake onto the plate and doused it with powdered sugar, just the way her son liked it. His chocolate milk came next.

The tabletop Christmas tree she kept year-round still held the tiny ornaments Benji had made and hung on it. And the present she'd had for him the year he'd gone missing still sat wrapped, waiting for his small hands to tear it open.

It was a glove and ball, something Benji had asked Santa for that year.

Would the glove still fit when she finally found him and he came home?

Two of her guests, a couple named Dannon, who'd come to Cobra Creek to celebrate their twentieth anniversary, gave her pitying looks, but she ignored them.

She knew people thought she was crazy. Mrs. Kran-dall, the owner of the diner in town, had even warned her

that perpetuating the fantasy that her son was still alive by keeping a place set for him was dangerous for her and downright creepy.

She also suggested that it would hurt Sage's business.

A business Sage needed to pay the bills—and to keep her sanity.

But she couldn't accept that her son was dead.

Not without answers as to why Ron had taken Benji from the house and where they'd been headed.

Not without definite proof that he wasn't alive out there somewhere, needing her.

Of course, Benji's hat and bear had been found at the scene, but his bones had never been recovered.

Sheriff Gandt theorized that Lewis and Benji probably had been injured and tried to escape the fire by going into the creek. But storms created a strong current that night, and their bodies must have washed downstream, then into the river where they'd never be found.

She should never have trusted Ron with her son. It was her fault he was gone...

She refused to believe that he wouldn't be back. She had to cling to hope.

Without it, the guilt would eat her alive.

Dugan gritted his teeth as Sheriff Gandt studied the bones.

"Could have been a stranger wandering through," Gandt said. "Miles of wilderness out here. I'll check the databases for wanted men. Criminals have been known to hide out here off the grid."

The medical examiner, Dr. Liam Longmire, narrowed his eyes as he examined the body they unearthed when they'd swept the debris from the bones. Most of the skeleton was intact. Of course, the bones had decayed and been mauled by animals, but there were enough that they'd be able to identify him. That is, if they had medical records to compare to.

"What about Ron Lewis?" Dugan asked. "It could be him."

Sheriff Gandt adjusted the waistband of his uniform pants and chewed on a blade of grass, his silence surprising. The man usually had an answer for everything.

Dr. Longmire looked up at Dugan, then Gandt. "I can't say who he is yet, but this man didn't die from a fire or from the elements."

"What was the cause of death?" Dugan asked.

Longmire pointed to the rib cage and thoracic cavity. "See the markings of a bullet? It shattered one of his ribs. I can tell more when I get him on the table, but judging from the angle, it appears the bullet probably pierced his heart."

Dugan glanced at Gandt, who made a harrumph sound.

"Guess you've got a murder to investigate, Sheriff," Dugan said.

Gandt met his gaze with stone-cold, gray eyes, then glanced at the M.E. "How long has he been dead?"

"My guess is a couple of years." Dr. Longmire paused. "That'd be about the time that Lewis man ran off with Sage Freeport's kid."

Gandt nodded, his mouth still working that blade of grass. But his grim expression told Dugan this body was more of a nuisance than a case he wanted to work.

"I'll request Lewis's dental records," Dr. Longmire said. "If they match, we'll know who our victim is."

Gandt started to walk away, but Dugan cleared his throat. "Sheriff, aren't you going to get a crime unit to comb the area and look for evidence?"

"Don't see no reason for that," Gandt muttered. "If the man's been dead two years, probably ain't nothin' to find. Besides, the flood last week would have washed away any evidence." He gestured to the south. "That said, Lewis's car was found farther downstream. If his body got in the water, it would have floated further downstream, not up here."

"Not if his body was dumped in a different place from where he died."

"You're grasping at straws." Gandt directed his comment to the M.E. "ID him and then we'll go from there."

The sheriff could be right. The victim could have been a drifter. Or a man from another town. Hell, he could have been one of the two prisoners who'd escaped jail a couple years back, ones who'd never been caught.

But the sheriff should at least be looking for evidence near where the body was found.

Gandt strode toward his squad car, and Dugan used his phone to take photographs of the bones. Dr. Longmire offered a commentary on other injuries he noted the body had sustained, and Dugan made a note of them.

Then Longmire directed the medics to load the body into the van to transport to the morgue, making sure they were careful to keep the skeleton intact and preserve any forensic evidence on the bones.

Dugan combed the area, scrutinizing the grass and embankment near where the bones had washed up. He also searched the brush for clues. He plucked a small scrap of fabric from a briar and found a metal button in the mud a few feet from the place where he'd first discovered the bones. He bagged the items for the lab to analyze, then conducted another sweep of the property, spanning out a half mile in both directions.

Unfortunately, Gandt was right. With time, weather and the animals foraging in the wilderness, he couldn't pinpoint if the body had gone into the river here or some other point.

Frustrated, he finally packed up and headed back to town.

But a bad feeling tightened his gut. Gandt had closed the case involving Sage Freeport's missing son and

Lewis too quickly for his taste.

How would he handle this one?

By late afternoon, news of the bones found at Cobra Creek reached Sage through the grapevine in the small Texas town. She was gathering groceries to bake her famous coconut cream pie when she overheard two women talking about the hikers that had been recovered safely.

The checkout lady, Lorraine Hersher, the cousin of the M.E., broke in. "A body was found out at the creek. Nothing but the bones left."

Sage inched her way up near the register.

"Who was it?" one of the women asked.

"Don't think they know yet. Liam said he was checking dental records. But he said the man had been dead about two years."

Sage's stomach clenched. Two years? About the time Ron's car had crashed.

Could it possibly be.?

Desperate for answers, she pushed her cart to the side, leaving her groceries inside it, then hurried toward the door. The sheriff's office was across the square, and she tugged her jacket around her, battling a stiff breeze as she crossed the street.

Sheriff Gandt had been less than helpful when Benji had gone missing. He wouldn't want her bugging him now.

But she'd long ago decided she didn't care what he thought.

She charged inside the office, surprised to see Dugan Graystone standing inside at the front desk. She'd seen the big man in town a few times, but he kept to himself. With his intense, dark brown eyes and brooding manner, some said he was a loner but that he was the best tracker in Texas. Tall, broad shoulders, sharp cheekbones—the package was handsome. Half the women in town thought he was sexy, while the other half were afraid of him.

Dr. Longmire stood next to him, the sheriff on the opposite side of the desk.

All three men turned to look at her as she entered, looking like they'd been caught doing something wrong.

Sage lifted her chin in a show of bravado. "I heard about the body you found at Cobra Creek."

Dugan's brown eyes met hers, turmoil darkening the depths, while Gandt shot her one of his condescending looks. She couldn't believe the man had ever been married and understood why he wasn't anymore.

She had heard that he'd taken in his ailing mother, that the elderly woman was wheelchair-bound, difficult and demanding. Even though she disliked Gandt, she had to admit his loyalty to his mother was admirable.

"Who was it?" Sage asked.

Dr. Longmire adjusted his hat, acknowledging her with a politeness bred from a different era. "The body belonged to Ron Lewis."

Sage gasped. "You're sure?"

"Dental and medical records confirm it," the M.E. said.

Sage's legs threatened to give way. She caught herself by dropping onto a chair across from the desk. Tears clogged her throat as panic and fear seized her.

But she'd been in the dark for two years, and she had to know the truth.

Even if it killed her.

"Was Benji with him?"

Chapter Two

Sage held her breath. "Sheriff, did you find Benji?"

Sheriff Gandt shook his head. "No. Just Lewis's body."

Relief spilled through Sage. "Then my son... He may still be out there. He may be alive."

Dugan and the medical examiner traded questioning looks, but the sheriff's frown made her flinch. Did he know something he wasn't telling her? Was that the reason he'd closed the case so quickly after Benji disappeared?

"Ms. Freeport," Sheriff Gandt said in a tone he might use with a child, "Dr. Longmire believes Ron Lewis has been dead since the day of that crash. That means that your son has been, too. We just haven't found his body yet. Probably because of the elements—"

"That's enough, Sheriff," Dugan said sharply.

Sheriff Gandt shot Dugan an irritated look. "I believe your part is done here, Graystone."

Sage gripped the edge of the desk. "How did Ron die, Sheriff?"

"Ms. Freeport, why don't you go home and calm down—"

"He died of a gunshot wound," Dugan said, cutting off the sheriff.

Sage barely stifled a gasp. "Then the car crash...? That didn't kill him."

"No," Dr. Longmire said, "he most likely bled out."

Sage's mind raced. Who had shot Ron? And why? "The shot caused the crash," she said, piecing together a

scenario in her head.

"That would be my guess," Dr. Longmire said.

"Was there a bullet hole in the car?" Dugan asked Gandt.

Sheriff Gandt shrugged. "I don't know. The fire destroyed most of it."

Sage folded her arms and stared at the sheriff. "But that bullet proves Ron Lewis's death was no accident. He was murdered."

Dugan worked to rein in his anger toward Gandt. The weasel should be comforting Sage and reassuring her he'd do everything humanly possible to find the truth about what happened to her son.

That was what he'd do if he was sheriff.

But he lacked the power and money the Gandts had, and in this small town, that seemed to mean everything.

"It appears that way," Sheriff Gandt told Sage. "And I will be investigating the matter. But—" he lifted a warning hand to Sage "—if your son had survived, we would have found him by now, Ms. Freeport. Odds are that the shooter fired at Lewis, he crashed and managed to get out of the car and fled. Maybe your son was with him, maybe not. But if he made it to the water with Lewis, he couldn't have survived the frigid temperature or the current. He would have been swept downstream and drowned."

"Sheriff," Dugan snarled, hating the man's cold bluntness.

The M.E. gave Sage a sympathetic look, then excused himself and hurried out the door.

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