

THE PEARL PLOT

Murder at the
Old Homestead

Vicky Ramakka

Advance Praise for *The Pearl Plot*

“In this gripping tale of love and death in the remote badlands of northern New Mexico, Vicky Ramakka captures the magic of the desert Southwest’s plants, animals, and unpredictable weather. Once I started reading *The Pearl Plot*, I was taken right along for the ride. I particularly enjoyed the multicultural aspects of the story and loved every minute with Millie.”

—Scott Graham, National Outdoor Book Award-winner and author of *Saguaro Sanction*, Book 8 in the National Park Mystery Series

“I thoroughly enjoyed *The Pearl Plot*. The story combines knowledge of the Four Corners and all its cultures with suspense and a compelling murder mystery.”

—Cindy Yurth, Navajo Times Assistant Editor and Reporter, Retired

“*The Pearl Plot* is intriguing and informative. It presents BLM resource specialists and managers as people, working as a team. As a BLM resource specialist for over 30 years, I perceived my fellow specialists and managers as family—working side by side to implement Congressional mandates for conservation and preservation.

Vicky’s rendering of the BLM and its challenges and humanity is as accurate as I have found in print. It’s a story that sparks inquisitive minds and reflects the complexity of public land issues. It was hard to put down.”

—Kristie Arrington, BLM Colorado State Office & San Juan Field Office, Durango, Retired

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By

Vicky Ramakka



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**Lejos Canyon, Rio Arriba County,
New Mexico
August, 1913**

Rosalinda Florez de Peralta surveyed the inside of the cabin and nodded. Everything was in place to greet José when he returned from tracking the mountain lion that had been attacking their sheep.

She had done her best to make a home in the cabin José spent the two previous summers building. She went to the small mirror over the table he'd built and straightened her braid of black hair that hung over her breast. Her hair was what José said he loved best when he was courting her. On their wedding night two months ago, she let it fall loosely around his face. That's when he began calling her *mi querida Rosa Linda*, my sweet, beautiful rose.

Before turning away from the mirror, she picked up her sewing basket and placed it on the bottom shelf, then straightened the two remaining objects on the table. She opened the cover of a thick book, *La Guia Practica de la Salud*, the Practical Medical Health Guide, a wedding gift from José's older sister, Margarita.

Rosalinda lightly traced her fingers over Margarita's carefully printed *Felicidades*, wishing the new couple happiness. The book's hundreds of pages held vital information for the young couple moving to their own homestead in the unsettled northwest corner of New Mexico. Rosalinda dreaded the time when she would need to consult the medical guide for a broken bone or a case of the croup in

the children she knew would soon be coming.

It comforted Rosalinda knowing Margarita lived only a few miles away. Margarita and her *novio* had moved to Lejos Canyon three years earlier. The day after their own wedding, José and Rosalinda made the same move. Unlike the long-settled upper Rio Grande valley, this corner of the newly created state offered the opportunity to obtain free land. José and Rosalinda believed they could turn the wilderness into farmland. They would make a home, till fields, plant trees and vegetables, and raise livestock. In five years, they would prove to the government that they had accomplished all this and obtain permanent ownership of one hundred and sixty acres.

Next to the book lay Rosalinda's most precious possession, the rosary her mother gave her. She turned and looked toward the front door. *José should be back by now.* She picked up the rosary and moved to the kitchen window to gaze at the rose bushes she'd transplanted from Taos and tended so carefully. She prayed for José's safe return.

As she prayed, she fingered the rosary's shimmering pearls, strung on a cotton cord, ten in a row, a space, a larger bead, another space, until she had circled around all five rows. She slipped her hand under the silver cross attached to the rosary and recalled the scent of her mother's perfumed powder and her solemn words just before they went to the church on her wedding day. "Keep this dear to you, *mi hija*. It has been in our family for many generations. It came with our family from Spain over the ocean to Mexico and now here to Taos. Someday you will give it to your own daughter on the day she weds." Her mother kissed the cross and placed it in Rosalinda's hands.

The rosary was beautiful, the pearl beads matched in size and shape, yet its silver cross seemed too large, more

suited to be draped in the hands of a Virgin Mary statue in a church. She hefted the solid silver cross that extended from her wrist to the tips of her fingers. It was smooth except for Roman letters inscribed where the vertical and horizontal pieces met. The ends were elegantly scalloped. “This would buy many cows or the finest two-horse carriage. But no,” she patted her stomach, “if you are a girl, this rosary will be yours. This cherished cross and rosary must stay with our family.”

She slid the rosary into the pocket of her apron, settling the cross diagonally as it was just a little too big to fit inside. “This is a special day,” she whispered, “the day I will tell José he will be a father. He should be back by now.”

At the sound of a horse’s hooves, she ran to the door. But it wasn’t José she greeted. A stranger tied the reins of a half-starved horse to the clothesline post and strode toward her.

“Where’s your man?”

Rosalinda looked in the direction of the sheep pen by the red sandstone cliffs. “He should be here by now.”

He grunted, pushed her aside, and stomped into the kitchen. “What you got to eat, woman?”

“I have posole and beans on the stove, *Señor*,” Rosalinda mumbled.

“Let’s have it then.” His voice held no hint of courtesy or gratitude.

The stranger had a matted brick-red beard, and his canvas pants looked like they carried dirt from sleeping on the ground and the blood of animals skinned for food. He smelled like his shirt had not seen the benefit of a wash tub for a very long time.

Rosalinda had never seen such a big man, not like her kin back in Taos. With shaking hands, she dished out the posole, put the bowl on the table, and retreated back to

the stove. She looked out the window across the rose bushes. Only Molly, the old carriage horse, and the milk cow stood in the corral. *Where is José?*

The man wolfed down the food and said, “What else ya got?”

She reached into the warming oven at the top of the stove and pulled out a bread pan. Rosalinda sensed the man’s brutish presence behind her. Instead of reaching for the bread, he grabbed her arm. “You’re a pretty little bitch, aren’t you.”

He yanked her across the cabin and threw her onto the bed.

The monster stood next to the bed, leering at her, showing yellowed teeth. “Now for dessert.”

Rosalinda’s hand went to her pocket.

He knocked her hand away, pulled out the rosary, and dangled the cross above her face. “Ah, that’s a pretty piece of silver you’ve got there.”

Rosalinda clutched at the rosary and gagged as he lowered himself onto her shaking body.

Pearls scattering on the floor were the last thing Rosalinda heard.

José stepped down from his saddle, slung the rifle scabbard over his shoulder, and tapped his good riding horse on the rump. The horse would go to the corral where José would unsaddle and feed him later, after saying hello to Rosalinda. He was eager to tell her the sheep would be safe now.

He stopped at the open door and called her name. He went into the kitchen and saw one empty bowl on the table and the bread pan on the floor. He called again for his *Rosalinda*.

At the bedroom door, José bent double as if hit in the stomach by the devil. He moved to the bedside, dropped to his knees, touched his beloved's cheek, and bawled. In time, he stood, backed away, and bellowed in outrage, "Dios! ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué?"

José staggered to the corral, harnessed Molly to the wagon, tied his saddle horse to the back, and drove to the front of the cabin. He wrapped a blanket around his dead wife and carried her to the wagon, murmuring to the horses to settle. They swished their tails at the strange sight and smell of death.

José went back into the cabin. He picked up dish towels from near the sink, found the broom and dustpan, and went back into the bedroom. He covered the darkening blotches on the bed with the towels.

Squeezing tears from his eyes, he collected the parts of the rosary that were still intact. He touched to his heart the jagged end where the cross should have been. He would not leave Rosalinda's most treasured possession, now defiled, in this place of violation. He swept under the bed as best he could and put the pearls into the dustpan.

Speaking to the horses to stand and wait, he carried the dustpan far away from the cabin and gently emptied the pearls on the ground. On his knees and using his hands, he pushed newly tilled dirt over them.

He kept his eyes on Molly's ears as he climbed onto the wagon, glanced one last time at the home he had built with his own hands, and jiggled the reins. The horses knew the way to his sister Margarita's house.



**Lejos Canyon, Rio Arriba County,
New Mexico
Present Day**

1. First Pearl

Stand on the rimrock high up on the mesa... Gaze up and down the canyon. The fragments of habitation visible today mask the long and eventful history of the area. Echoes of the past resound.

— Marilu Waybourn with Paul Horn, *Gobernador*

“Millie, come here, I’ve found something.”

“I’m not wading back through all that cow manure to look at another piece of blue glass from some old bottle,” Millie shouted back.

“This is different. You’ve got to see this.”

The excitement in Lydia’s voice intrigued Millie. She walked to the corner of the orchard where a blue tarp, pegged to the ground, served as a work base. She laid her clipboard face down so a breeze wouldn’t ruffle the site recording forms. With long strides, Millie followed the path through the sagebrush that connected the orchard to the abandoned cabin and outbuildings.

Millie ducked under the weathered lintel of the old homestead’s door opening. The door had disappeared long ago. She looked around the middle room, somewhat larger than the kitchen area in front and the much smaller room in back that had probably been used as a bedroom. The roof was still intact, held up with sturdy ponderosa pine vigas brought from the high country, crisscrossed by narrower juniper latillas, and covered by a thick layer of adobe. Cows had found this shaded room a fine place to loaf on hot summer days. Millie picked her way around the dried manure piles toward the corner where Lydia was squatting next to a pack rat’s nest.

“What did you find this time?”

Lydia snapped a photo then set her camera on a nearby clipboard. She used the hem of her T-shirt to rub dirt off a small object and held it in a shaft of sunlight coming through a crack between the wallboards.

An iridescent spark flashed from between Lydia’s stubby, calloused fingers.

“It’s round, like a bead,” Lydia said, without taking her eyes off her newest discovery. “Look, there’s a hole in each end like a string would go through. It’s a bead, that’s what it is. Look at the way it shimmers. I think it’s a pearl.”

Lydia dropped the pearl in Millie’s outstretched hand. It was about the size of her fingernail and tapered slightly into an oblong shape.

“It’s beautiful, almost glows. What would it be doing in here?”

“There’s a story here,” Lydia mumbled, accepted the pearl back from Millie and resumed rolling it around in her palm, mesmerized.

“That’s what you archaeologists do, right? Figure out the stories of how people lived a long time ago.”

This seemed to snap Lydia back to her job of documenting the cabin and outlying buildings. As project botanist, Millie was focused on identifying the site’s vegetation, both native and remnants of the cultivated plants. The homestead was once home to Hispanic settlers who migrated from communities north of Santa Fe to unclaimed land in northwest New Mexico. The site had recently come under Bureau of Land Management care as part of a land swap with the homesteaders’ descendants. They traded 160 acres of this sparse canyon land for 23 acres of crop land where the family could grow vegetables and the lucrative green chile.

Millie and Lydia were assigned to survey, record, and produce detailed documentation of the 160 acre parcel. Building on the survey conducted under the National Historic Preservation Act prior to the land exchange, their work would form the basis of a management plan for the entire site. If successful in representing its special features and cultural connections, their report would be used to nominate the homestead for the National Register of Historic Places.

Lydia stood up, reached into her backpack slung on a peg in the wall, and pulled out a small white cloth bag. She dropped the pearl into it, pulled the drawstring tight, and felt for the round treasure inside the cloth. She tied the drawstring into a double knot, taking no chance of losing this surprising artifact. She filled out its tag with date,

location, and description, then tucked the little bag in the front zipper pocket of the pack.

“Let’s see if there are any more curiosities here.” Lydia got down on both knees and began whacking a black chunk of dried rat droppings with a trowel.

Millie eyed the three-foot-high jumble of sticks piled in the corner. “You think digging through that rat crap is going to do you any good?”

“Yup. Pack rats are an archeologist’s friend. They drag food for themselves and their young into nests like this. Sometimes generations of them. They keep piling on sticks, conifer branches, seeds, bark shreds for nesting material, even small animal bones. And bless their little pea brains and sharp eyes, they are curious, adventurous creatures. If they see a button, something shiny, anything out of the ordinary, they carry it back to their nest.”

“I’ll leave you to it. I’m going back out into the sunshine.” Millie picked her way back around decaying manure piles, ducked out the door, and threw her arm up to shield her eyes. She tugged her wide-brimmed hat lower on her forehead, pulled her ponytail to one side to free the sunglasses’ string, and put them on. She surveyed the view that the people who built and lived in this humble structure would have woken up to every morning. The corral twenty yards to the south would have had many more logs between the posts. Now, only the tops of gray, wind-whipped posts were visible above the overgrown rabbitbrush and Russian thistle. Next to the corral, a low shed was almost overtaken by weeds. One end of the roof was still held upright by 10-foot, round posts, but its other end had collapsed and sagged to the ground.

Millie walked halfway along the 50-yard path that led from the cabin to the dirt road that ran the length of Lejos Canyon. When the homestead became federal property,

the BLM had outlined a small parking area next to the road with a split-rail fence. Beyond the road, red sandstone cliffs blocked the sky to the west. Millie estimated it would take less than a fifteen-minute walk to reach the base of the cliffs, but that had to wait for another day.

She turned a complete circle. Beautiful, rugged, lonely. What was it like to live in this remote place? Blazing hot in the summer, freezing in winter. Leaving your family and venturing to an unsettled land two hundred miles away. The quiet. Husband off tending sheep. Not seeing another human being until taking horse and buggy to church on Sunday.

Millie herself was two thousand miles from her family. It had taken her three days to drive to New Mexico from New Jersey. It would have taken about that long for this family to travel from Taos by horse and wagon, packing supplies and essential goods, starting a new life. What high hopes they must have had, building, planting, making a home. What happened to make them leave?

Lydia's humming and thumping on the pack rat's nest filtered through the disintegrating walls of the cabin. The sun's glare off their Bureau of Land Management vehicle parked by the road made Millie again throw up an arm to shield her eyes. Each evening, she and Lydia drove the 45 rough miles back to town for a shower and soft bed. The sturdy Suburban with the triangular BLM logo on its door was reassurance that working in this lonely outpost was only for the duration of the survey of the Peralta Homestead. She turned back and followed the path between the cabin and corral to the orchard.

Millie stopped by the first apple tree, not much taller than herself. Two blooms lingered on this tree, labeled #1 on the diagram she'd sketched the first day of her survey. This one, Millie was pretty sure, was a Jonathan

apple tree, probably planted by some later caretaker of the property in the 1930s or 1940s. Not as old as some of the specimens in this historical fruit orchard. Likely it was planted to replace one of the original orchard fruit trees that didn't make it through a harsh winter.

It had taken Millie three days to locate the nearly 100 original orchard plantings, eight rows spaced roughly twenty feet apart, each with a dozen trees zig-zagging back toward the wash and red rock cliffs on the far side of Lejos Canyon. Some of the trees were now no more than stumps two or three feet high. Others still had gnarled branches that sprouted leaves each spring, produced a few blooms, and amazingly enough, fruit. It was these survivors that were the sought-after heirloom varieties. Valuable because of their genetic makeup that somehow suited them for survival in the extreme hot and cold seasons of the high desert. Valuable and vulnerable to poaching for grafting on temperamental, newer varieties.

The sound of a car door slamming brought Lydia out into the sunshine. Millie left the orchard and joined her by the cabin's doorway. A medium-height man waved and walked toward them, his scuffed hiking boots lifting puffs of dust from the sand.



2. Root Cellar Chill

Avoid inquisitive persons, for they are sure to be gossips, their ears are open to hear, but they will not keep what is entrusted to them.

— Horace, Roman Poet, 65–8 BC

This was the first visitor to the site since they'd started surveying three days ago. The stranger called out in a gravelly voice, "What are you ladies doing out here?"

Lydia met him halfway, shook his hand, and started up a conversation as if she hadn't seen another soul for weeks.

By the time they reached Millie next to the cabin, Lydia knew enough about the visitor that she was ready to introduce him. "Gavin, this is Millie Whitehall, the botanist on our project. Millie is recording the fruit orchard and vegetation on this homestead site."

“Hi, I’m Gavin McIntyre.” He pulled two business cards out of his shirt pocket and handed one each to Millie and Lydia.

“Ancient Ones Adventure Travel,” Lydia read aloud, “and your logo looks like a Phase Three Puebloan trade-ware pot.”

Gavin’s eyes narrowed, his head tilted to one side. “How would you know something like that?”

Lydia sighed. Sounding as if she’d been challenged by such questions too many times, she said, “I’m the archeologist on this project. I’m doing the documentation on this homestead.”

“Is that so? I’ve never met a Black, um, African American archaeologist before.”

“Well, now you have.” The tone of Lydia’s voice made it clear that any further questions would get him nowhere. “We’ll be writing up a proposal to have this place added to the National Register of Historical Places.”

Millie fingered the grubby, ragged-edged card that apparently had been in Gavin’s pocket for some time. She glanced toward his van parked along the road, an eight-passenger carry-all. It had a banged-up bumper and mud-splattered windshield. The same elegant bowl shape was painted on the side door.

“Yeah, now I have.” Gavin flashed a no-harm-intended smile. “I thought I was at the right place when I saw the government vehicle parked here. I do jobs for various cultural resource contractors helping on archaeological digs, driving my van for their crews, fetching equipment, that kind of thing. Whenever they need an extra field person, they call on me. In between those jobs, I use my van for tours. That’s my favorite thing to do, take people around to places like this.”

Millie wondered why a man who looked to be in his

late forties didn't appear to have a steady job. Yet, his creased, tanned face and field clothes backed up his claim of doing outside work in the desert southwest.

Gavin's head swayed as he took in the cabin from end to end. "Interesting," he said. "I've driven past this place, but never took the time to look around on this side of the road. I usually go right to the Lejos Canyon rock art site, over there." He pointed toward the cliff across the road, then snapped his fingers as if remembering why he stopped. "I'm scheduled to take a van load of university graduate students on a week-long tour of northwest New Mexico archaeological sites. It would work out just right to bring them by here the morning we come off two nights camping at Chaco Canyon. That would put us in Wellstown just about supper time."

Lydia was nodding her head, but Millie cut in before she could speak. "That'll depend on how we're doing on this survey. You'll need to check with the BLM office in Wellstown." Millie wasn't ready to give away a half-day's work to entertain this man's tours.

Millie ignored Lydia's scrunched-up face. Millie was the lead on this project, having all of one season with BLM under her belt and familiarity with working in the Piñon Resource Area's remote backcountry. Lydia was new to the BLM agency, though she had more years doing historic archeological work.

Undeterred, Lydia addressed Gavin. "Well, anyway, have you ever seen the inside of one of these old places?" Lydia patted the doorpost, ready to usher their visitor inside the cabin to see her pack rat nest excavation.

Gavin made no move to step into the dim interior. "Course I have. I've spent years poking around these canyons." He had a deep, strong voice, the kind that carried far, an appealing asset for leading tours. "You know this

place is haunted, don't you?"

"What?" Millie and Lydia said simultaneously.

"Everybody around here has heard the story that this place is haunted. Legend has it that the couple who homesteaded here, well, the wife was murdered. The body's buried in that old cemetery about twenty miles down the road, or it's buried somewhere on this property. I've heard it both ways."

Lydia's raised eyebrows pulled her eyes wide. "A murder? Here?" Then she shook her finger under the much taller man's face. "Ah, you're fooling with us."

Millie turned, put a hand on each side of the door opening, and leaned inward. "I don't see any ghost." She turned back and nailed Gavin with a hard stare. "I don't appreciate hearing tales, either. We're doing authorized research here. Not interested in stories you might feed to tourists."

Gavin folded his arms, and his face took on a deeper tan. "It's not a story. That's why nobody's lived here ever since the family that built it."

Lydia jumped in, "Un-uh, that can't be. There's been a fire in that cast iron stove way later than that. I poked through the ashes and saw some bits of tin foil."

"I know why that could be," Gavin said. "The hands from Turley ranch used to stay here once in a while when they were rounding up cattle. I had my load of tourists at the Devil's Claw café a few years ago. A half dozen or so cowboys came busting in for lunch after delivering cattle to the big transports that pick them up at the mouth of Lejos Canyon."

Millie crossed her arms and gazed upward, noticing for the first time the spindly needle and thread grass that had taken root in the cabin's sod roof. The distinctive twisted projection with pointed end lent to its nickname

of needle and thread grass. Lydia had not taken her eyes off Gavin.

“Those cowboys claimed they saw the ghost, well maybe they said they just heard the rattling and moaning. They were all sleeping outside, of course. Nobody’s going to bed down in that rat infested shack, but they used the stove to heat their supper. They were pretty quiet, so the waitress said, ‘Out with it, boys, what happened?’ One of the fellows finally fessed up they’d heard some strange things coming from the kitchen around midnight. I guess they were being quiet about it because not one of them had braved up to go inside.”

Gavin pointed to the dark interior. “It’s my thinking that those cowboys just heard pack rats or something scrambling around in there. But the story goes that the wife’s ghost comes back here, dressed as a bride, still waiting for her man to come home. Rumors go around every so often about somebody passing by on the road thinks they see a figure in white at the door, this door here. Who knows?”

Gavin shrugged, gave a chuckle, and turned to look across the property. “You ladies found the root cellar yet?”

“Haven’t located it so far,” Lydia said, “but I know most of these homesteaders put in a root cellar. Had to store up food to last through the winter, being so far from town out here.”

Gavin nodded toward a slight mound that extended about twenty feet from the cabin before it slanted back into ground level. “I always like to check out a root cellar. I found a, well, I’ll just say, something valuable, in a tobacco can once. Wouldn’t mind taking a look in that one over there.”

“Bless my soul, why didn’t I see that?” Lydia grumbled. “Let me get my camera and clipboard.” She ducked into the

cabin's dark interior and rejoined Millie and Gavin, carrying a meter stick in one hand. "Let's check it out." While settling the camera strap around her neck, Lydia headed toward the mound, but a tangle of raspberry brambles stopped her when she got closer to the door. Gavin skirted around her and stomped through the tangled thorns with his heavy boots.

Millie, nearly a foot taller than Lydia, saw where the patch of raspberries, planted long ago, petered out. "Over here, Lyd, come this way."

They rounded the end of the old garden with Millie in the lead. Gavin was standing in front of a door overgrown with bindweed. Three stone steps led down to the door made of wooden planks, now weathered and gray. The door had two panels that met in the middle, with a rusty hasp holding them together.

Gavin moved back from the door and motioned to Lydia, "Let's open 'er up."

"Yeah, that's in the movies, where they smash through a wall and find a skeleton." Lydia placed the meter stick against the door. "First, I'll document this opening *in situ* before we even touch it." The stick's 39-inch top came even with the hasp and another two feet of planking extended above it. Lydia took eight steps back, clicked the camera, moved to the left, clicked some more, and did the same from the other side. Then standing on the top step, she turned and aimed the camera back toward the cabin. "Later, I'll measure the distance the homesteaders had to walk back and forth every time they needed supplies for a meal."

Millie wasn't too keen on seeing what was behind the decaying door; it looked like the entrance to a crypt. She turned her gaze toward the rock cliffs across the road. Maybe a rock would roll off, something, anything to keep

her occupied while waiting for Lydia to finish.

Gavin swiped sweat off his forehead but said nothing.

Finally, when Lydia lowered the camera, Gavin said, "Go ahead, open it, just like the archaeologists in the movies who open up a king's tomb."

Lydia set the meter stick aside and pulled out the wooden peg holding the hasp closed. This jiggled the rusty hasp loose and Lydia caught it just before it fell to the ground. "Well, that was easy," Lydia said, squeezing her fingers into the crack between the weathered doors and lifting upward. Nothing moved. Lydia pushed in, still nothing. She tried prying the doors apart with the broken hasp.

Gavin took a step closer and said, "Look at the bottom. Sometimes they put another latch at the bottom to keep snakes and mice out."

Lydia reached behind the tangle of bindweed on the bottom step. They could hear a scrape as she pushed the bottom latch aside. The two doors dropped inward revealing another set of steps down into the root cellar.

"That latch didn't do much good keeping critters out." Lydia turned sideways so Millie could see. Bits of snake-skin, a desiccated horned toad, and the skull of a small mammal littered the steps.

"I ought to take photos," Lydia muttered, but curiosity superseded her scientific training. She used the meter stick to sweep back and forth to clear a way through a curtain of cobwebs and eased down the steps.

Millie, on the first step outside of the root cellar, bent low and looked over Lydia's shoulder. Lydia stiffened.

"Oh my God." Lydia backed up the steps, hands over her mouth, and pushed past Millie.

"What?" Millie took a couple more steps down and ducked through the door. She breathed out short puffs of

breath to push away the floating dust and earthy smell, letting her eyes adjust to the dim interior. There was an upside-down bushel basket, a dented washtub, and a broken crock on the wooden shelves that lined both sides of the root cellar.

Then Millie saw it. A crumpled form tucked under the lowest shelf on her right. Bones inside a flannel shirt and tan slacks gave shape to a human form, dried out by desert heat. Tufts of hair still clung to the back of a partly bare skull.

“Oh, gawd,” Millie groaned, “I don’t want to deal with another dead body. This happened to me last summer.”

Millie retreated back into the sunshine. She knew the look of horror on Lydia’s face likely matched her own. She put a hand on Lydia’s shoulder for support as they breathed out dust and disgust.

They both turned toward the sound of the van’s engine starting and watched Gavin back onto the road and drive away.

“What’s going on with him? Yellow-belly just turned tail and ran,” Lydia grumbled.

“We’ve got to call Robby,” Millie whispered. Then answering the quizzical look on Lydia’s face, added, “Robby Ramirez. She’s the Law Enforcement Officer for the Piñon Resource Area.”