

Walk of Death

A forensic novel

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A few minutes after midnight, in the thick muggy heat of a Tennessee July, a pair of headlights swung sharply off State Highway 48 South, and began to inch along a steep gravel road. Its path seemed to climb vertically up Gatlin's Ridge, an isolated area of Dickson County. Finally the car shuddered to a stop, just feet from the lip of a ravine that disappeared into darkness. As headlights cut out, and two men emerged, their movements became quick and furtive.

The shorter man, with a balding head and short, stubby arms that seemed disproportionate to his rotund figure, gently opened the driver's side rear door. Struggling briefly with a large, unwieldy object inside, he hissed an order to his muscular companion. The other man stooped to help his partner, and, a moment later, they had pulled the limp body of a man from inside the car.

Together, they shuffled to the driver's seat, and arguing in clipped whispers, they awkwardly placed a decomposing corpse inside. With a weak flashlight guiding their motions, the shorter man leaned over and strapped a tattered gray seatbelt across its sagging torso. The head drooped forward, a slime of decomposing greenish gray residue dripped from its mouth and nose. A partially severed tongue dangled by a tiny tissue tag, allowing the segment to lay flat against the corpse's chin.

The shorter one slipped a wedding band from his left hand, and a small, silver pinky ring from his right hand, jamming both onto the body's cold mushy fingers. He removed his watch he had always worn on his right wrist, his trademark since he was left handed, and strapped it onto a limp and soggy wrist.

As he positioned the body securely, the taller man grabbed a container of gasoline from the trunk and began soaking it liberally on the dashboard, upholstery, and corpse. Strong fumes of gasoline were still no match for the putrid odor. He emptied what was left into the trunk and shut the empty container inside. Flames would totally engulf containers, seats, everything, leaving no evidence. They had thought of everything. Or so they thought.

The shorter man put the car in neutral and idled its engine. It rattled as if it were firing on only half of its cylinders. He lit a match, tossed it inside onto the carcass's lap. As flames licked up the corpse's shirt, quickly catching its hair on fire and engulfing its head, they ran to the rear of the car.

"One . . . two . . . three," the short man sucked in a lungful of air. Both of them threw their shoulders against the rear bumper and shoved with all their might.

At first, there was a sputter and stall, like a gray elephant picking its way in slow motion down a rocky hill. It threatened to stop halfway down, but then, gradually, it gained speed, then more, and more. As wind fanned more flames, the car's interior lit up like a massive fireball igniting midnight darkness. Suddenly the front end hit a ditch, throwing part of its nose downward. The back end sailed, becoming instantly airborne, and then there began a series of end over end flips. Both front doors were ripped off, glass shattered, and flames began to lash out of either side just as the car slammed into a massive oak tree.

Microseconds after impact, just as planned, the entire car exploded into a ball of raging fire, followed by a second massive explosion that sent sparks and flames skyward. Metal shrapnel and shattered glass flew skyward, causing tremors like an earthquake, releasing a shower of leaves and branches.

Both men stood on the ravine's lip, gazing downward, their dark forms surrounded by thick rolls of fog mixed with black, sooty smoke. A full moon cut through the mist to light their faces. "How 'bout that?" he muttered. "Wonder how that seat belt is working out for him now?" He laughed at his own twisted humor. His friend only blinked at him in wide-eyed disbelief. It was done.

Mission accomplished.

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