

The Perfect Crime

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Introduction

A new kind of justice is coming.

Texas Ranger Justin Graves and his rebellious daughter, Christy, are dead, both murdered by her drug-dealer boyfriend, Billy Denton. Due to Justin's dedication to the department and long hours away from home, he blames himself for her life of crime, so he makes a deal with the devil to save her soul: one hundred bad guys in exchange for her pardon from hell. Now, in his rotting corpse, he returns from the grave to deliver the devil his dues, the souls of killers who'd gotten away with murder.

The Perfect Crime

Pete whistled. „Come on, boys.“

King and Cong, two Rottweilers came running, their muscular frames undulating with each massive stride. Clumps of grass flew up from under their clawed paws.

„Time for supper.“

Bounding in through the back door, they careened into the kitchen and headed for their gallon-size metal bowls now heaped with chicken parts and beef livers and garnished with green beans. These healthy 110-pound brothers ate twenty pounds of food a day.

Chomping and slurping and gasping huge gulps of air between bites, their meals were quickly devoured.

Pete glowed with pride ... until Martha stomped into the kitchen and shouted, „Get outta here!“ She grabbed a broom and started whacking Pete. „How many times do I gotta tell ya to feed them nasty critters outside?“

King and Cong escaped through the closed screen door, tearing it to shreds.

„Someday, Martha, I swear.“ He showed her a fist.

Hands on her ample hips, Martha went nose-to-nose with Pete. „What are ya gonna do, you skinny wimp? Takes them big-ass dogs to make ya feel like a man. Give ya some delusion of power over the beasts. Well, it ain't workin', ya fool.“

„Do you have to be so damned mean?“

„Mean? I'll show you mean!“ She slapped him upside his head. „Get outside and pull them weeds outta my garden!“

Pete rubbed a hotspot growing on his temple. „But I'll miss my TV shows.“

Martha huffed. „All ya ever do all weekend is sit around watching that damn detective crap, true crime, and them FBI fellas huttin' down killers. It's for pussies, I tell ya. A waste of time. What's wrong with watching them ass bustin' football games or a good fishin' show like real men do?“

„You know I don't like that stuff.”

„Cuz you ain't man enough, that's why. Now git outta here!”

With Martha's broom stinging his bottom side, Pete stumbled out the back door.

„And clean up that dog shit!”

Anger burned hot as blowtorch fire in his chest. He joined his dogs in the yard and sat Indian style in the grass amidst piles of dog crap scattered all around. Hell! He'd just cleaned it up yesterday. King and Cong had watched him scoop up the poop, their tongues flapping, each oblivious to the stinky messes they'd made.

Fact of life: big dogs leave big piles. Seemed like all his dogs did was eat and shit all day.

But they were his buddies. Who else would go with him up to Cedar Ridge, across Pine Bluffs, or even down the back forty of Dead Man's Canyon? Not Martha. She didn't like the great outdoors. But he lived to enjoy the wide-open spaces.

Deckers, Texas, was surround by some of the state's finest wilderness areas, and he knew most every backwoods mile by heart. He'd been hiking through the mountain forests most of his grown life. With King and Cong trotting along, the bears didn't even bother them. Now, if they could just get that lucky with Martha. She was worse than any old bear, and his dogs were smart enough to give her a wide berth.

Eat and shit all day.

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There was no fixing Martha. As she got older and fatter, she got uglier and meaner. He couldn't blame her much, though. Hell, he'd be pissed off at the whole world if he was that ugly. But she was a fair bride back in the days when she liked to ride the wild pony. Now, the only riding she'd been doing lately was riding his ass.

He sighed. Right now, on his favorite TV show, Detective Curland was probably on the trail of some husband who'd killed his wife, buried her body in the backyard, and poured a cement slab over it, or possibly a psycho killer who took some poor street whore out into the bush, bashed in her skull, did her like he loved her, and then dug her a shallow grave. Those killers should've watched the TV shows about how detectives figured out who committed crimes like that. The cops had ground-penetrating radar to see under cement slabs and cadaver sniffing dogs to find shallow graves. Nine out of ten killers left something behind, like DNA evidence, the murder weapon, or fibers, and even blood splatter on the walls.

Oh, they'd try to clean up their messes, all right, but they didn't know that Luminol could show the investigators just where blood had splattered or pooled. Hell, they'd even taken drains apart to find bone chips in the plumbing, and sometimes they'd pull up floor tiles to reveal where blood had seeped down through the cracks. Oh yeah, cops like Detective Curland were smart.

And Pete was smart too. He'd seen all their shows. The trick to not getting caught was twofold: don't make a mess, and leave nothing behind, preferably not even a body.

„Git to work!” Martha yelled from the screen door, what was left of it, anyway.

He scanned the poop piles and thought how much more pleasant they were to be around than Martha. She should be so lucky to be a pile of dog shit ... which sounded so true he had to chuckle, then he glanced at King and Cong, all happy tailed. An idea struck him.

King whined. Cong barked.

He patted his dogs. „Don't worry, boys. I got a plan for the old witch.”

Eat and shit all day.

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After a weekend of digging up weeds, shoveling dog crap, and listening to Martha cackle like a crazed hen, Pete sat at his desk in his cubicle at Farnes, Baker, and Associates, thankful for the peace and quiet. F.B&A., a graphic arts and Web design company, had been his escape from Martha's bitching for the last three years. On the walls, he'd hung photos of King and Cong, a nice picture taken from the rim of Dead Man's Canyon, and his Certificate of Service with the Department of Parks and Recreation. No way would he tarnish his safe haven with a picture of Martha's mug.

He clicked on the scanner app, ready to get to work on a private project, but a voice from his doorway stopped him.

„Good morning, Pete.” Miss Perkins, his pimple-faced secretary, stepped into the cubicle, coffee cup in hand. „How's King and Cong?”

„Great, great, now if you don't mind—”

„I wish I had a couple big dogs around my house. Keep the burglars away.”

„And the bears. I'll remember you in my will.”

„And how's Martha?”

„She's fine, just fine... now please, I've got a ton of work to do.” He hoped she'd leave and not hang out all gabby as usual. “Hold my calls.”

“As if you get any.” She walked away, giggling.

Quickly, from his suit coat pocket, he removed Martha's driver's license, which he'd snuck from her purse this morning. F.B&A. had the best graphics arts equipment in the business, and he was going to put it all to good use. He slipped the license under the scanner lid, hit scan, and saved the image file to a temp folder on his hard drive. These were the critical times of his plan. If anyone discovered him doing unauthorized graphics design, he'd have to bail.

Heart pounding, he scanned his F.B&A. identification card, cropped his picture, and using a photo enhancement program, added long brown hair to match one of Martha's old wigs, lightened his complexion, and reddened his lips. Satisfied he would pass for a woman, he transferred the photo to Martha's driver's license copy, then printed and laminated it.

Came out as good as the official state-issued license, but with him looking like Martha, well, better actually. He deleted the temp folder, pocketed the license, and pulled out a note Martha had once written him, more of a tease than anything else.

„Gone to San Francisco. I'm not coming back.”

Very funny. She'd actually gone to the grocery store, damnit. He'd kept the note as a wishful reminder that dreams could come true, and now he was glad that he had saved it.

Clicking online, he ordered a one-way ticket to San Francisco for next Sunday night, in Martha's name. E tickets were great. He punched in her credit card number and clicked Enter.

Transaction completed. Have a nice flight.

After erasing the cookie and the temporary Internet files on his hard drive, he was ready for the second part of his perfect plan for the perfect crime, the flea market in Martinsville, just down the road.

He drove there during lunch, wearing Martha's brown wig and a long coat. From one vendor he purchased a meat grinder, another sold him some standard sink drainpipes, and from an old man on crutches, he got an axe that didn't even need sharpening—all for cash. A roll of plastic and some surplus ChloraSorb rounded off his list. He was back to work only ten minutes late, hungry but happy.

He nodded to the pictures of King and Cong hanging on his cubical wall. „We're almost free, boys.”

Eat and shit all day.

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Saturday morning, Pete rose early and dressed in some old work clothes he'd not worn for many years. King and Cong were having fits, barking in the backyard. They hadn't been fed breakfast yet, on purpose.

Martha sat up in bed. “You better shut up them damn dogs.”

„They're hungry.”

Martha wiped away a clump of hair stuck to the side of her face. “What are you doin' up so early?”

He showed her a short length of rope he'd been holding behind his back. “Remember how you told me them detective shows were a waste of time?”

„So?”

„You're wrong.” He lunged at her. The rope whipped around her neck so fast she had no time to react. Her eyes bulged, more from surprise than pressure, which he was now applying with force, twisting the rope. This way there'd be no blood-splatter evidence.

She kicked some, and croaking noises came from her throat.

But he was careful not to apply too much pressure. He didn't want to break her larynx, because blood would run out of her mouth and seep down into the mattress. It would take her longer to die this way; she'd suffer more than necessary, which was kind of a bonus. He had her pinned down good, too, so she couldn't scratch him, or otherwise leave any marks of a struggle.

She went limp, finally, but he didn't release his hold on the rope until he was sure her heart had stopped. Everything was going as planned. Detective Curland would be stumped.

Struggling with her bulky dead weight, he managed to strip off her nightgown, then packed it in her suitcase, along with some of her underwear, a couple of dresses, makeup, and shoes. Then he dragged her naked body into the bathroom and flopped her into the tub. He'd already covered the walls and floor with plastic, Dexter would have been proud, and removed the shower curtain, which he'd reinstall later.

Now for the hard part. Working with the axe and hacksaw, a makeshift cutting board, and the carving knife they'd used every Thanksgiving for the last ten years, he started to dismember Martha. One thing about those detective shows became suddenly evident. They never showed the real horror of murder, the blood and guts, or the smell and the sick feeling it made in one's stomach. Did he mention the blood? How could any one person have so damn much of the stuff? Fearing it would clot and clump and end up clogging the drain, he turned on the faucets full force.

King and Cong yelped and scrapped in the backyard.

Pete went about his gruesome task. He cut off her arms and legs first, stripped flesh from the bones, and using the dog bowls and mop buckets for catch basins, put Martha, bit by bit, through the meat grinder clamped to the sink counter. Then he opened up her belly. Putrid innards spilled out like fat spaghetti.

Yuk!

Arming sweat from his forehead, he suffered through the gore and stench until he'd ground up every part of Martha and hacked all her bones to splinters. Late evening arrived by the time he'd cleaned up the bathroom and stuffed all the plastic and his bloody clothes into the suitcase with Martha's belongings.

He carried the heavy metal dog bowls to the kitchen, and opening the back door, he whistled. „Come on, boys. Time for supper.”

King and Cong came running, bounded into the kitchen, and slid up to heaping bowls of ground meat. As always, their meals were devoured posthaste. And that night they had seconds.

Eat and shit all day.

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Pete enjoyed the flight to San Francisco, dressed as Martha, flying in coach to visit friends. That was what he'd told the flight attendant and the passenger seated next to him, just to make sure his—Martha's—presence was noticed. He'd passed through security screening with her fake ID and the boarding pass he'd printed off the computer. Last but not least, he picked up Martha's suitcase at baggage claim. His biggest concern was getting rid of it.

From there, he went directly to the men's room and walked in with a deliberate swagger to his step. No one would give a transvestite a second look. After all, this was San Francisco. Once locked in a toilet stall, he changed out of his disguise, got back into his street clothes, repacked the suitcase, and walked out, easy as could be.

Now to find a Dumpster.

Outside the terminal, he found some trash barrels, too small for the suitcase, but as if on cue by God himself, a trash truck pulled up. While the trash man wrestled with a barrel, Pete stepped behind him and tossed the suitcase into the hopper. The man dumped the barrel's contents on top of the suitcase without noticing it. Pete backed away. The truck's hydraulics whined as the claw dragged the trash into the compacter and crushed it.

Success was a sweet pill to swallow.

He returned to the terminal and purchased a one-way ticket home, for cash, of course. If suspicion ever arose around him, the cops would know he'd never left town, so they'd never look for a flight that brought him back into town. Even Detective Curland wouldn't think to do that.

Totally confident in the execution of his perfect crime, Pete flew back on the Red Eye in time for work Monday morning. Now to get rid of the body.

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It took all week to feed Martha to King and Cong. Dog shit piled up in the back yard.

Eat and shit all day.

In the meantime, he replaced the plumbing in the bathroom and tossed the meat grinder, carving knife, axe, hacksaw, and empty ChloraSorb bottle in a Dumpster behind Deckers Hardware and waited for the trash truck to haul it away. It would be ten feet deep in the landfill by dusk.

That weekend, he and his dogs went hiking in Dead Man's Canyon. They brought Martha along this time, to the great outdoors, in a garbage bag that barely fit into his backpack. King and Cong had sat with their tongues flopping wetly as Pete collected their dog shit from the backyard and then said a little prayer over the big bag of excrement: „Ashes to ashes, shit to shit,” or something with that flavor.

During their daylong hike across the canyon rim and down into the narrows, he scattered dog shit here and there along the way, in the bushes, between crevices, and even in a stream that cascaded down a rock wall until nothing was left of Martha's shitty remains anywhere to be found.

Not even Detective Curland would be able to prove foul play, should Martha's whereabouts ever come into question. She'd simply left a note, packed her bags, and flown to San Francisco where her trail grew cold. Wives left husbands all the time.

Pete had committed the perfect crime.

He found a nice shady spot under a crop of evergreens and sat on a rock at the edge of a cliff. The vista was spectacular up here, the only good thing in his life worth living for, besides King and Cong. His unwitting accomplices sat in front of him, their tails wagging as they tilted their heads and watched him pull ham sandwiches and apples from his belly pack. The bottle of red wine he'd brought along would top off the celebration nicely.

A slight breeze rustled the trees. Then everything became perfectly still.

He extracted the cork from the wine bottle and took a slug. „To Martha,” he hailed. “To dog shit.”

King and Cong whined.

He tore a sandwich in half and offered each piece to his dogs. „Dessert,” he said. „Something to wash Martha down with.” He chuckled. „A Martha chaser, you might say.”

King and Cong gulped down their booty without even chewing.

Then a fecal stench rose in the air.

„All right. Which one of you is the wise guy?”

They both panted. Nobody fessed up to passing gas.

The gut-wrenching odor got worse. Pete was beginning to think he'd picked a bad spot for his little picnic. There must've been an open outhouse pit somewhere nearby. He leaned forward and peered over the cliff, saw nothing but rock wall all the way down to the river. Nothing around but boulders and trees.

The growing stench made the wine in his stomach turn sour.

King and Cong yelped and ran off down the trail.

„Hey! Get back here!” He stood, but suddenly felt dizzy like he got up too fast, and teetered on the edge of the cliff. The wine bottle slipped from his grasp and shattered on the ground. Then a pressure on his chest made inhaling difficult. Christ! He was having a heart attack.

„Hello, Pete,” a raspy voice said from behind him.

Stilled by surprise, he clutched his chest and slowly turned around. What he saw gave him a fright, a cowboy shedding dirt from his long brown coat. He must've fallen off his horse and got dragged through the mud, or more likely a pasture full of cattle dung. God, he stunk something awful. And half the skin on his face was gone; his exposed molars looked like they'd never seen a dentist. What the hell was he doing here, standing on the trail in the middle of nowhere? „Who are you?”

He tipped his dusty cowboy hat. „Didn't mean to startle you, sir.” Steel gray eyes set deep in dark sockets glared out from under the hat brim. „Name's Justin Graves. But you can call me Justice.”

Seizing his composure, „I'd offer you some wine,” Pete said, „but as you can see...” He pointed to the puddle where the bottle had broken. „I'm fresh out.”

Seemingly unconcerned, the nasty cowboy approached, his boots crunching dirt. „Martha is upset with you.”

Yeah, right. „How is it you know Martha?”

„I talked to her yesterday.”

Impossible. She was dead yesterday. The old cowboy was full of shit. „You want an apple?”

„We watched you feed her body to the dogs, Pete.”

His heart lunged in his chest so hard he truly believed he'd fall over dead from cardiac arrest. This couldn't be happening. „You can't be serious.”

„I know how much she hated those dogs. She told me everything.”

„No way.” He wasn't stupid enough to tell him that he couldn't have talked to her because she was dead. That would be a Detective Curland trick to get a confession out of him. Pete could've written the script for that pitfall. She was dead and not talking to anyone.

Justin parted his coat lapels, revealing rotted flesh and exposed rib bones. „Believe me now?” Worms wriggled in and out a circle-star badge pinned to his tattered gray shirt.

„That's gross!” The sight of him was worse than Martha splayed open in the bathtub. And more disturbing than that, why did the old man think he needed to prove he was dead and that he could have spoken to Martha? It was like he knew Pete's thoughts, and right now he was thinking: You need a doctor.

„I'm fine, really.”

Okay, he could read minds.

„I'm a homicide detective, deceased, as you can see, and I know you killed your wife.”

Pete fought to remain cool, focused. „There's no proof of that.”

„You watch TV. There's always proof.”

Pete stepped away from the smelly old ghoul, careful not to get too close to the edge of the cliff. „You don't know what you're talking about.”

„That's what they all say about us dumb cops.”

„If you're so smart, what do you got on me?”

„Did you consider the airport security cameras? It's all on tape, you know, Martha going into the men's room, you coming out.”

„Why would anyone look at a security tape? She's not even missing.”

„Nope.” Justin grinned, or maybe he yawned, it was hard to tell. „I know exactly where she is.”

„San Francisco, damn it. She's in San Francisco. I have a note to prove it.”

„No she isn't. She's in the afterlife awaiting justice for her murder. Only then will she be able to cross over to everlasting peace and happiness.”

„That's malarkey. There's no proof a murder was committed. No body.”

„Come on, Pete. How else do you think I knew you went to San Francisco? I watched you. I even sent a trash truck so you could toss the suitcase in it, the suitcase with all the evidence.”

„You did that?”

„I know where the cops can find it, too. Then I made a phone call to my boss, Captain Holland. His detectives are combing your place for clues as we speak. How's all that for malarkey?”

Pete frowned. He'd been extra thorough. Completely. Not a trace. Clean bed sheets. Clean bathroom. Clean dog bowls.

„And your dogs have been eating well,” Justin added.

The words felt like a knife going into his chest and twisting, carving out a hollow place that quickly filled with doubt. What could he have left behind? Nothing. Nothing at all. „You guys must've got a bad tip on Crime Stoppers. They're not going to find anything. And you're bluffing about the suitcase.” He'd seen it get crushed.

„You sure?”

„Of course.” Pete gulped. Of course he was sure. Okay, he wasn't sure.

Justin crossed his arms. Bones creaked. „Nine out of ten killers leave something behind.”

„So I've heard.”

„What have you forgotten?”

These trick questions kept popping into the conversation. Detective Curland must've trained this cowboy homicide detective. „There's nothing to forget.”

„Where's the rope?”

„The rope? What rope...?” It was in the suitcase, deep in the landfill by now. He'd put it in the suitcase...or...well, now he couldn't remember what happened to the rope, but he wasn't going to say anything incriminating.

„It's under your bed,” Justin said, his voice grating.

„How the hell do you know what's under my bed?”

„When you stripped off Martha’s nightgown, it fell to the floor and you accidentally kicked it under the bed. Out of sight. Out of mind.”

„You’ve been snooping around my house?”

Justin tipped his hat back and pointed up. „I see everything from up there.”

Pete looked up. Blue sky. An impossible thought seized him. „You’re from heaven?”

„Not exactly. I didn’t quite make it that far, but close. Along the way I made a deal with the devil to save my daughter’s soul. Gotta get a hundred bad guys, and let’s see, I’m not real sure but I think you’re number eighty-nine on the countdown.”

„Eighty nine? You’re saying the devil knows about me?”

„Hey, you made his top one hundred list. That’s got to be worth something.”

„Oh, shit!” Pete could hardly breathe. This cowboy ghoul was for real. „They’re going to find the rope.”

„And you’re going down for Murder One.”

He slumped on the rock. His dogs were gone and his celebration was completely ruined. „She made my life miserable, don’t you see?”

„That’s not a capital offense, Pete. You should’ve divorced her instead of killing her.”

He looked up at the ghoul. “You really did talk to her?”

„Yup, and she’s pissed off at you.”

„What else is new?” He exhaled.

„Feeding her to the dogs like that, Pete, how could you?”

„Ironic, I’d say.” Pete had to laugh.

Justin looked around. “It’s nice up here. Enjoy the view while you can. Until the police get here. Then you’ll spend the rest of your life in an eight-by-ten-foot cell.”

„I can’t go to prison. I need this, the wide open spaces. Living in a cell will kill me. And besides, who’s going to take care of my dogs?”

„Mrs. Perkins, your secretary. I recall she wanted a couple big dogs. I’ll see to it, but don’t worry. She’ll feed them regular dog food.”

„But it was the perfect crime.”

„There’s no such thing.”

Pete stood, the consequences of his failure greater than he could bear. There was nothing left for him now. He stepped to the edge of the cliff, looked down to the river below, and wondered if the water was cold.

With a gust of wind the ghoul was gone.
