

Chapter One

Just northwest of downtown Colorado Springs, where the prairie gathers itself into great rolling foothills, there rises from the earth a colossal monument: the red-orange Garden of the Gods, a collection of 300-foot-high sandstone and shale monoliths sculpted by the winds over sixty-five million years to resemble cathedral spires, a pair of kissing camels or Siamese twins.

Rampart Range Road, a rutted gravel washboard, winds away from the mystical stones to within six miles of snowcapped Pikes Peak - Colorado Springs' pink granite citadel, which at 14,110 feet dominates the landscape in all directions – then snakes about 60 miles north along the crest of the Rampart Range to Sedalia, a short distance south of Denver.

Most of the many pickup trucks and jeeps that roar up and down the lower stretches of Rampart Range Road are headed for a popular firing range, where the shooters blast away at paper targets and bags of household garbage (a local quirk) set against the red dirt hillside. This is rural Colorado where modern-day mountain men grow their beards to their chests and the battered Chevy Suburban parked in the turnout probably is someone's home.

For some, Lower Rampart Range Road serves another special purpose.

Rough and wild, though not too distant from busy north-south Interstate 25, it is a convenient destination for discarding dead bodies. Since the 1970s, nearly a dozen homicide victims have been discovered along Rampart Range Road, and those are just the ones the weather and carrion eaters didn't finish off first.

Seven and a quarter miles up from the Garden of the Gods, the bumpy track runs along the high divide between Williams Canyon to the southwest and Queens Canyon to the northeast. There,

the mountainside falls away in a steep, 400-foot drop to the base of a ravine thick with pine trees and scrub oak. It is a wild, yet peaceful place. The wind rushes through the pine boughs and raptors of several species circle overhead.

It was here that in September 1993 Timothy Belbeck chose to camp in his pickup truck. Belbeck was too short on cash to afford his favorite accommodations, the Pink Panther Motel down in Colorado Springs, but he did have enough money for provisions, including whiskey.

The forty-year-old drifter would later tell investigators how a group of young men showed up and started aimlessly throwing rocks over the side of the cliff. From far below he heard the clink of stone striking metal, a welcome sound for it meant scrap – chrome, aluminum, maybe even some copper – which Belbeck knew he could turn into cash.

It would be tricky to recover anything from the deep ravine, but as Belbeck worked his way toward the bottom of his whiskey bottle, the prospect of running dry emboldened him. Two days later, the whiskey gone, he scrambled down the steep hillside, past a waterbed mattress, until he came to a blue and white 1961 Chevrolet Impala that looked as if it had been rusting away there for at least fifteen years. A front door was open and the car was filled with dirt from a mudslide. But the old junker still had its radiator, starter, generator and a battery, all salvageable for drinking money.

Belbeck looked around and saw a derelict washing machine, a good sign that there was even more junk to be found amidst the trees and dense brush. Continuing with his reconnaissance, about twenty-five feet below the Chevy he came across a round thing with zigzag marks running across it. The object was smooth and shaped like the other rocks on the hillside, but its color gave him pause. He rolled it over with a stick, and saw teeth.

It was a human skull, Belbeck realized at once. Too spooked to touch the thing, he looked again at the sutures running across the top, the eye sockets, the protruding front teeth, just to be sure. Then he bolted and ran – hard - back up the hillside.

Once he got his breath back, and his brain straight, he pondered how to proceed. If the skull was connected to the car, he thought, the victim’s family ought to be notified. Perhaps there would even be a reward in it for him. Unfortunately, a second trip down the hill yielded no further information. So he thought some more. A friend advised that if he reported the skull, Belbeck might come under suspicion, and he didn’t need that kind of trouble. Then again, there might be that reward.

On Sept. 13, four days after he first found the skull, Belbeck finally went to the Colorado Springs police to report his discovery, which he described as a body.

“Not our jurisdiction,” the Springs police said. They sent Belbeck to the El Paso County Sheriff’s Office.

“Body in a car? That’s an auto fatality,” said a sheriff’s deputy. He directed Belbeck to the Colorado State Police, where at last he connected with Trooper Ron Quintana.

The 36-year-old Quintana had spent the last eleven years investigating crashes and making traffic stops. He had a habit, he liked to say, of being “an inquisitive trooper.” Tim Belbeck struck him as a real banana, right from the start, but Trooper Quintana knew better than to dismiss the scruffy transient without checking things out.

Quintana drove with Belbeck to Rampart Range Road, where he and the transient worked their way down a rappel line into the steep ravine and found the old car full of dirt.

“So where’s this body?” he asked.

Belbeck just laughed and shrugged.

Annoyed, Quintana walked below the car, thinking that a body could have been carried down the mountain by the mudslide. Glancing at the ground around his feet, he saw that same odd object partially buried in the dirt. The moment he bent down for a closer look, however, Ron Quintana instantly knew, as Tim Belbeck had, that here was a human skull.

The bones were so weathered that at first the trooper thought the skull was a centuries-old Indian artifact.

“I wonder who he is?” Quintana said, holding the skull out for Belbeck to see.

“How do you know it’s not a she?” Belbeck responded.

Quintana placed the skull in a brown paper evidence bag, and returned with Belbeck to the state police barrack to take Polaroid photographs of the skull, and to further quiz its discoverer. He strongly doubted Belbeck’s story. The hill was too steep. The car was too far down, too buried in trees and brush to strike with a rock. Then there was Belbeck’s repeated suggestion that the skull could belong to a female. The man, Quintana thought, was far too interested in a reward. As a precaution, he fingerprinted and photographed Belbeck, as well.

Since it seemed unlikely that skull came from the car, the state police lacked jurisdiction. So, with Belbeck in tow, Quintana drove over to the El Paso County Sheriff’s Office. There, the trooper sat for two hours with the skull in its brown bag on a deputy’s desk before being told, “Old car? Old skull? Auto fatality. It’s yours.”

Next and last stop of the day: The El Paso County Coroner’s Office, where the macabre evidence was accepted and logged in for examination.

Quintana then drove to a Wendy’s restaurant for a late dinner with his family. As he arrived, his thirteen-year-old daughter, Rhiannon, walked up to his cruiser in the parking lot and looked

inside. Before her father could stop her, Rhiannon spotted the Polaroids of the skull, clipped to the case file cover jacket on the seat beside him.

"Dad, what's this?" she asked as she picked up the pictures for a closer look.

She could see that the bottom jaw was missing, but the top front teeth instantly caught her attention. They were very distinctive, two large incisors flanked by two crooked laterals. Rhiannon's eyes flew to a missing person's poster in the Wendy's window.

Over the last two years, the face of this other 13-year-old girl with her big glasses and her toothy smile had become a heartbreakingly familiar one, to Rhiannon and to nearly everyone else all over the region. The child had disappeared without a trace from her home while babysitting her little brother. There was hardly a person in Colorado Springs who didn't know her name.

Ashen, Rhiannon Quintana pointed to the poster.

"Dad, it's Heather Dawn," she said. "You've found Heather Dawn Church."