

"I'll kick the red dust off my boots and give this five full stars out of five!"
— Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*

Scalping THE Red Rocks

A
DEREK MASON
MYSTERY

Greg Lilly



Praise for
SCALPING THE RED ROCKS

“*SCALPING THE RED ROCKS* is an exciting, well-written page-turner of a mystery, which will keep you guessing as you slowly learn more about each of its colorful, complex characters...I’ll kick the red dust off my boots, and give this five full stars out of five!”

— Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*

“With eco-terrorists, wildfire and a shocking scalping, Greg Lilly’s *SCALPING THE RED ROCKS* rips the mask off the superficial New Age haven of Sedona, Arizona, to reveal its darker side, in a don’t-put-it-down mystery that will keep you guessing right up to its stunning climax. A winner!”

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and *HIGH CRIMES ON THE MAGICAL PLANE*

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— Amos Lassen, *Literary Pride*

“The characters are diverse and real enough to touch, the story is set so firmly in Sedona, it couldn’t take place anywhere else, and the varied agendas and motives keep you wondering *whodunit* to the very end.”

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CHAPTER ONE

The psychic foretold love and loss for me in Sedona. Couldn't the bitch just give me a break? Love, that would have been worth the fifty dollars, but no, she had to add loss.



I steered the Ford Explorer off Dry Creek Road and into the condominium's parking lot. The buildings had a low adobe style and courtyards scattered with prickly pear cactus and juniper. In the seat beside me, Aunt Ruby fiddled with her purse strap.

"This one doesn't seem right, Derek," she said. "Maybe we shouldn't even look at it."

The real estate agent's Mercedes waited in the driveway. Parking the SUV next to it, I turned to Ruby. "You haven't even seen the inside. These condos are great."

I had to admit I liked the style and location the best of all the condominiums we had seen. The place was perfect for Ruby: One level, no stairs, a garage, no yard maintenance, close to shopping and the medical center. Not that she needed a medical center, but as she aged, the proximity comforted me.

Ruby had gotten the itch to move to Arizona after visiting some friends in Sedona. She wanted a new start, a complete change from her old life. Not waiting for any more protests, I climbed out of the Explorer and walked around to open her door and helped her down. Now in her early seventies, Ruby valued her independence, her youthful appearance, especially her ruby red hair, and wanted no form of old-lady assistance, except for her L'Oreal 74 Copper hair color. She would accept my hand to help her from the passenger side of the SUV as my gentlemanly act, not as a sign that she needed

help.

“These things are so hard for a lady to gracefully exit from,” she complained and tried to hold her skirt down as she slid from the seat.

“Moving to the West, you need to give up some of that Southern gentility,” I kidded her. “We will buy you some jeans.”

“Lord, I can’t remember the last time I wore slacks, let alone a pair of Levi’s.” She held my arm as we walked up the sidewalk toward the mission-style front door. The morning sun hadn’t peaked over the roof, so the front of the condo was cool and shaded; the air held the clean sweet smell of sage.

“See,” I said and opened the iron gate to the low-walled courtyard, “you could have your morning coffee out here and look at those views of the red rocks.” The condo’s front courtyard defined a small area around the entrance to the home, not so much for privacy, but more for the Southwestern style. Sage grown tall and thick, almost to the roofline of the adjoining condo, created a nice hedge from the neighbor’s driveway. Something scurried in it, shaking the thin branches. “Wildlife at your doorstep,” I said. But she didn’t respond, only stared at the front door that had been left open.

“Aubrey shouldn’t leave the house exposed to the desert creatures,” she mumbled. “Why, a scorpion or a rattlesnake could just waltz right in there and spring on me.”

I pushed the door open wide and a key in the lock brushed my hand. Surprised that her real estate agent Aubrey Garner had been so forgetful, I dropped it into my pocket to give back to him.

Inside, the entry floor was tiled with deep-tan Travertine and the walls were bright white. The place was empty of furniture, but an arched niche by the door and the ceiling beamed with vigas—exposed rafters made from peeled tree trunks—assigned a distinct Southwest style to the interior. “A blank canvas,” I said to Ruby, “for you to paint your new adventure.”

She ran her hand over the polished wood of the door then pushed it closed. “Nice,” she said. “You know how we have to pull up on the knob to close the door back home? Nice to have new things that work.”

“Aubrey,” I called to announce our arrival.

No answer.

Ruby opened the coat closet and scanned the size. With a few strides in, I glanced around the great room and the kitchen. “Aubrey, it’s Ruby and Derek.”

Again, no answer.

“Maybe he’s out on the back patio.” I left Ruby as she surveyed the kitchen. The glass doors to the back courtyard displayed a panoramic view of Thunder Mountain’s towering height just blocks from us and the long, flat, tree-topped plateau of Mogollon Rim to the distant east. I unlocked the patio door and slid it open. The air in the West always amazed me with its purity, at least in the more rural areas. Possibly the lack of humidity or the airflow across the mountains, but in the high desert of Arizona my breathing seemed easier.

Aside from the air, I attributed that to being away from my family. The trip to Sedona came at the perfect time for me. Aunt Ruby had decided to move out of North Carolina, I had a business errand, and everything converged in Sedona just like the New Age rhetoric claimed.

But then it hit me: sulfur. The smell the Baptist preachers warned about, brimstone, hell, burning flesh. It was just a flash as the wind whipped it by. But the odor seemed to lash by again as if a ribbon of sulfur bound the atmosphere of the patio.

A fire pit on the edge of the patio held fluffy ashes that stirred in the breeze. Someone had left small stones circling the cemented rocks that formed the fire pit’s border. Assuming the condo was uninhabited might have been a mistake—I glanced around for anyone nearby. I seemed to be alone. I sniffed at the ash and found the source of the sulfur odor. The placed stones looked to be arranged as some sort of a compass since they lined up with the sun’s path. Someone had made the fire recently and burned something nasty. I wondered if it had been Aubrey or another agent, since there weren’t really any other signs of a transient squatting in the place. With a quick aim from my cell phone camera, I snapped a picture of the ring—I was curious and wondered if the rock circle was a Sedona

thing. Our rental house had several books on Sedona and its New Age rituals. I stepped away from the smelly fire pit and stared at the towering crimson rocks and the black ravens gliding on the air currents.

Sirens screamed. The sound of a large truck raced by the front of the condo, fading away up Dry Creek Road. When I looked back for the ravens, they had left and a gray plume of smoke snaked up behind Thunder Mountain. *Construction fire*. I had read in the local newspaper about fires set at new building sites.

When I reached for the door's handle, the fact hit me that I had unlocked the patio door, so I knew Aubrey hadn't left out the back.

Inside, Ruby continued her inspection of the kitchen cabinets, her frown easing into a satisfied grin.

"How does the kitchen suit you?" I asked.

"Nice," she said. "But I miss ours in Charlotte. I knew where everything was and how that old oven tried to burn on the right side."

"After all those years in that same house, I'm sure you knew it well."

"It knew me too," she added. "I feel odd going to a new place, like I'm cheating on the house in Sedgefield, being unfaithful."

"Best to let some young couple buy it and raise their family there." Ruby and Walterene had lived in the same house since they were in their twenties. In a quiet old neighborhood called Sedgefield in the heart of Charlotte, North Carolina. They made their life together in that house, cousins who had never married or showed any signs of interest in the male of the species, the old maids of the family. I never thought much about their sexuality, but after Walterene died I realized that my aunts had been a couple—no truer marriage existed in the family, no union more loving or supportive than Walterene and Ruby's. Now that Walterene had passed on, Ruby seemed lost. I could see the hurt in her eyes. Getting on with her life, moving to Arizona, selling their house and buying a new condo just for her—without Walterene—must have felt like a betrayal of Walterene's memory. A new life away from the environment she shared with Walterene must have scared her. I admired her for the first steps and

wanted to support her along the way.

“Where’s Aubrey?” she asked from the kitchen.

“He’s around somewhere. Might have stepped out for a moment.”

She narrowed her blue eyes to squint at the hallway. “Something feels wrong here. I can’t explain it—I’m just not comfortable in this place.”

“Could be that there’s no furniture,” I said. “The other houses we saw still had people living there. It’s hard to imagine how cozy this could be with just bare walls. I like it. You could place the couch there.” I pointed to the long wall across from the fireplace.

She raised a painted eyebrow and nodded a noncommittal agreement.

Trying to lift her enthusiasm, I suggested we check the bedrooms down the hallway but as I walked into the master suite the air chilled at the door even though the warm April sun beamed through the east window. No sound or cool current wafted from the central air vents but the room definitely seemed colder than the rest of the house.

“Ruby, stay there for a second,” I said not sure why, but I had joined her in thinking that something was askew.

I turned the corner and saw it from the open bathroom door: A man’s body lying on the tile floor. Motionless, feet together, arms extended out. Blood covered the tile, blood that had gushed from the top of his head.

His scalp had been cut away.