

Secrets of Beaver Creek

*A story of lies, love, sex, power,
violence, truth, and, at last, a
people's revolution*

A novel by
Ben Zeller



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Dedication and Thanks

Secrets, a fictional novel based on fact, is dedicated to those who have suffered because of slipshod government regulations; people such as Ben and Marline Bounds of La Veta, CO, whose well house blew up when escaped coal-bed methane gas found its way from a newly drilled well into their water system and their home. Four times they fled in fear when seeping coal-bed methane set off an alarm installed in their bedroom. Under the present lax regulations, the Bounds and many others must put up with the devastation and destruction caused by greed, thoughtless drilling and unproven operating procedures used by those thinking only of profit: those without honest consideration for land owners, or the health of our planet's very fragile environment.

My thanks to *National Geographic* and *High Country News*, among other publications, who opened my eyes to the dangers of uncontrolled drilling to procure coal-bed methane gas. In the process, they alter water tables, poison fish and destroy rangeland with billions of barrels of alkaline water and thousands of miles of poorly laid; poorly maintained roads. Worse of all, they give vent to their goal: the highly volatile, extremely poisonous, coal-bed methane gas, releasing it into people's wells, basements, back yards and playgrounds.

Thanks to Wendy Gray who edited my dyslectic spelling and sentence structure. Thanks to Russ Deal for his expert advice in the use of high explosives in the fourth of July conclusion to *Secrets*; to Jon Dolak for his incite into the construction of coal bed methane pipelines and the involvement of government agencies in this loosely managed, nationally sanctioned fiasco.

Thank you to my agent, Georgina who always answers my email: to my wife and family and to my friend, Billy Ray, one of the greatest storytellers I have ever known.

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Dead Black on the Banks of Beaver Creek

The first slice of sunlight cut the morning sky. It painted the cape of clouds shrouding the Sangre de Cristos an appropriate blood red, prophesying rain or terror. The evening news had done the same with dark warnings of flash floods. Who knew? Gail knew not to trust any of the signs. New Mexico weather was the cutting edge of guesswork; a sharp slice of nothing you could count on—like life in Radiant, she thought. Radiant was her birthplace and home, the throbbing heart of Coal County. Gail watched the surrealistic northeast landscape of New Mexico crystallize as the sun inched above the horizon. Flat mesa tops crowned with red and gold. Their long shadows stretched for miles across the high plains. Gail welcomed the promise of warmth the sun brought with it, albeit a blood-red sun. She shuddered off the chill beneath her denim jacket and wished that Clinton were beside her, but Clinton was already on the range riding the east slopes of Baldy Mountain. It was dark when she saw him ride out. She watched him from the bed still warm with the scent of love. A few minutes later, she was in her little Nissan four-wheel drive. She hoped the promised rain would hold off as she barreled down the dusty road heading for the reality of husband and family. A heavy rain would turn the dust to adobe mud in minutes.

Clouds in the east darkened, cutting off the sun. The sparsely graveled ranch road made a sharp turn to the west. As she neared the one-lane bridge crossing Beaver Creek, she noticed a trail of dust made by a vehicle ahead of her. She did not want to be recognized driving in from Clinton's ranch. Actually, it wasn't Clinton's ranch. It belonged to some millionaire. Clinton only managed it. She would let the car ahead go on to Radiant. Watching the elusive old beaver would be a good excuse to stop. She had time. Gail was in no hurry to get home.

She pulled up on the narrow steel bridge and got out. The clouds opened. The distant shadows of the mesa reached across the plains again. Subconsciously, she listened for the crotchety, old, buck beaver to slap his wide flat tail in the muddy water of early dawn. None of the beaver family appeared. Where were they? She looked down toward their house of sticks and mud and the dam the beady-eyed animals always kept in order. Gail wished she had kept driving.

The man lying in the shadows beneath the cut bank of the stream didn't move. He was black: a handsome light tan color, his body well built, finely toned with no gross, bulging muscles. Gail judged him a bit over six feet tall. His only clothes were a pair of scarlet jockey shorts. Nothing more. That is, if you disregarded the paper shopping sack pulled over his head. His hands were lashed behind him. Gail shivered. She pulled her denim jacket close. Forced by an unwanted pregnancy to drop out of nursing school in her last semester, she still had a professional eye. The body was relaxed. The paper sack was leaking red. The black man had not been lying there long. He had not been dead long. The blood was not congealed. Perhaps he had been an unwilling passenger in the car or truck she had seen drive away in the dust: a TV fantasy. Gail did not intend to lower herself down the steep gravel cut for closer scrutiny. The man was dead. She was certain of it. She turned and faced the sun, blinking hard to clear her vision. When she looked back, nothing had changed. She hadn't expected it to. She just needed confirmation. The man was definitely not breathing, and he definitely had been living only a short time before she drove onto the bridge.

There was a cell phone in her pickup. It was in the glove compartment, turned off. She only turned it on in an emergency...or when she was lonely. Loneliness can be an emergency. She was very lonely right now. Her husband, Harold, worked the night shift at the meat-packing house across the border in Colorado. He wouldn't be home until 8:30. She had left her two boys with Aunt Gail. She was named

after her aunt. Young Gail grew up an only child with a working mother. Her father fled the paternal nest a few weeks after she was born. Her mother never mentioned her husband to her young daughter, except to say he disappeared.

Four years ago, Gail's mother died of cancer, a disease she refused to acknowledge until it was too late. Her twin grandsons were born a week after their grandmother died. Gail's mother's sister, Aunt Gail, filled the void. Gail's two boys called her "grandma" and loved to listen to her stories as much as Aunt Gail loved to tell them. They often spent the night with her now that she lived close to town. Aunt Gail would drop them at her niece's house in the morning after the twins had lapped up a huge breakfast of homemade pancakes, or Gail would pick them up.

Shaken by the sight of the dead man, Gail got in the truck and opened the glove compartment. The phone blinked when she pushed the button. Should she call the police? Chief "Squintch" Mackey would recognize her voice. That would never do. He'd know she had spent the night with Clinton. For a police chief, he didn't know much, but he always knew things like that. She couldn't call her husband, and Clinton was already on the mountain. She studied the green light of the phone keypad as she moved back to the low bridge railing and looked down again. *What a waste*, she thought. *If the dead man's face was as handsome as his body, he must truly have been a beautiful man.* She was sure, even with his head covered, that had she seen him before she would recognize him. She had an eye for good-looking men. This one she had never seen. "What a waste." She said it aloud this time. She leaned out over the railing. Her sudden shadow startled the big buck beaver. He slapped his wide flat tail with a report as sharp as a gunshot. Gail dropped the phone. It sank into the muddy water.

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Gail was in bed when Harold pulled into the drive. Her husband stepped over to her little Nissan 4x4 and felt the hood. *Warm.* He could hear the radiator gurgling. "The only way to stop a bitch like her is shoot her," he said quietly. Bare, muddy footprints led from Gail's bright red pickup to the house. He knew she would be in bed, feigning sleep, but the muddy footprints puzzled him. "Where the hell's she been this time?" Harold followed the tracks into the bedroom.

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