# PLACES NOT FOR MORAL MEN

BY J.R. SUTPHIN



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CHAPTER 1

# GRAY MATTER UNDER A FLUORESCENT HUM (PART 2)

The chirps of the cicadas and the buzz of the lights were not interrupted by the sound of the three gunshots. The insects swarming those light poles didn't mind either. They continued flying about in the halos that pierced the darkness, having ignored the violence set upon the victims, who now lay lifeless on the pavement. One man's head split open from a bullet. Another bled from his gut. The last lay dead from the wound in his chest.

But the elderly lady who lived near the gas station certainly felt bothered by the sounds which had startled her awake and pierced the peace of the night. Miss Eugenia wouldn't have been surprised to hear an occasional faint blast of a shotgun in the morning or evening from the nearby woods. But this late? And this loud? She knew these shots could not be from a hunter.

Hunting wouldn't happen right outside the Quik-Save station, near the edge of town, and from when her grandpa taught her to shoot a lifetime ago, she recognized these distinctive pops couldn't be

from a shotgun. That's why she'd called to report it about 15 minutes ago, and why she was still too tense to fall back asleep. She tried to calm herself.

*I'm sure it's nothin',* Miss Eugenia thought, not being able to fathom what Aaron Tanner was about to discover. In fact, he was thinking the same thing as he pulled his cruiser into the parking lot.

"Hey, Vance. I'm on site," the young Deputy Sheriff said into his radio.

"What ya see, man?"

"Well, not much. I'm gonna have to take a look. What time's this place close up?"

"Ah, 'bout 9," replied the radio.

"And the owner doesn't hang around?"

"Naw, Gary's out of there by 9:30 tops most nights."

"Yeah, that's what it looks like," Aaron said, while stretching his neck and attempting to get a better look from behind the windshield. "I'm gonna walk around."

Aaron took a quick drink from the metal thermos in his cup holder, even though the water had lost its chill hours ago. He stepped out into the same heat that had sat over the county all day. The lot smelled like old gasoline, and something worse was coming from the dumpster around back. Inside the dark store, a cooler compressor kicked on with a low hum. Flashlight in hand, he slowly examined the area. From the front of the building, all looked normal.

Aaron then noticed a familiar red Ford F-150 truck peeking out from behind the building, giving him the first hint that something was not right. As he stepped around the back of the structure, his confidence in false alarms quickly faded into concern. From just behind the dumpster, he could see the arm on the ground.

He quickly put his hand on his holster to loosen the strap over his firearm, and cautiously approached the dumpster, now wishing he had thrown on his bulletproof vest before getting out of the car but acknowledging there was no going back.

"Sir or ma'am. Can you hear me? Are you okay?"

No response. Deputy Tanner drew his gun.

"This is the law. Show yourself if you can get up."

No response.

As his feet followed the wide path around the bin to get a better view, his eyes followed the path of the arm up from the hand to the head that was tucked underneath the shoulder.

"Jesus. Vance, you there? I think I've got a 10-54 and need backup now. Call first responders."

"Shit, man, I'm on it," the radio replied.

"Can you hear me?" he said, approaching the unresponsive body, knowing the only answer would be silence, especially now that he could see the blood.

Aaron knelt down and moved the shoulder just enough to confirm this person was not alive, further convinced after checking for a quick pulse under the victim's chin.

"Okay," he said into his radio. "I've got a body … dead … male, Hispanic … early 20s. Looks like a gunshot to the chest."

"K, man. I've got Bryson on his way, and EMS is gonna be there in 5, too."

Aaron's eyes moved away from the body to see how it arrived at the dumpster by tracing the blood trail to the other side.

"Vance, did the lady that called it in say how many shots she heard?"

"She told us it was several shots. They woke her up about 15 minutes ago. Three, she thought."

"Several?" Aaron said as he quickly rose to his feet, this time his gun fully drawn, eyes wide open, now trying to diagnose the entire scene. It was at this moment he began to receive the full picture. The man behind the dumpster was not alone. He noticed another body lying closer to the back of the building, accompanied by a large pool of blood, also a Hispanic man.

As he approached him, he saw a third body out of the corner of his eye, away from the others, slumped over the curb next to the fuel tank. But this body was different. He could already tell from the

illuminating street lamp that this one was not Hispanic, but an older white man. And there was something familiar about him that Deputy Tanner couldn't quite put his finger on from this distance. So he moved closer, gravel crunching beneath his shoes with each step, eventually gasping for a breath with the realization.

The sound of an approaching car meant backup had arrived. Vance from the other end of the radio confirmed it.

"Hey, buddy, I got Bryson there. … Aaron? … Aaron, you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Vance … the body … there's another dead one … it's the Sheriff."

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The air was especially thick this time of the year from the humidity, only worse this night due to the storm that passed only about an hour ago. The vapor in the summer air trapped everything in the spaces between these hills—the heat, the smells. Tonight, for the people who had gathered around this gas station parking lot at the edge of town, there was the scent of aluminum in the air, brought about by the pools of blood on the pavement.

The scene of the crime was chaotic. Both the flashing red and blue lights and the movement of officers were erratic.

A few townsfolk who lived nearby inched closer and closer to try to steal a look at the scene. The crowd of onlookers was gradually growing in size. People were shocked. Some were crying.

CAUTION tape was still being strung up, with officers trying to maintain composure and follow protocol, while multiple townspeople questioned them about what was going on, trying to get answers on the bodies on the ground, and if it was true that one of them was their beloved Sheriff.

Everyone's questions were directed to Aaron, since they had heard he was first on the scene.

Jason Cross, an officer in the Mapleview Police Department, arrived at the gas station and made a beeline directly toward him.

"What we got?"

"It's John. He's been shot dead. He's by the fuel tank o'er there, and then we got two other victims, both Hispanic, guns next to the bodies, including John's. And we checked; he didn't call anything in."

"How'd you find yourself here?" Jason asked him, already in interrogation mode.

"The call went out that someone had heard some gunshots. I was in the area, so I checked on it. I guess all your guys on duty were busy, but I was happy to help. The woman who called it in said it came from the area around the gas station, so that's what I started with, and soon noticed John's truck sitting over there. I mean, I wasn't positive it was his at first. I walked around and discovered the bodies. Now I'm trying to figure out why John would be out here with his gun and find himself shot. Maybe he saw something going down while he was off duty?" Aaron leaned down to get a closer look at the corpse. Jason didn't join him in his proximity to John's head.

"That shit don't bother you?" Jason asked.

"What shit?" Aaron asked.

"Ya know. His brains and …" Jason's hands mimed an explosion.

"I mean, it ain't something I like to get close to. But we got to see what happened."

"Yeah, I mean, I guess this ain't nothin' compared to Iraq, right?"

Aaron didn't respond.

"Where's the chief at?" Aaron said, looking around and just realizing the head of the Mapleview Police Department wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"He's in Atlanta. But on his way back up as we speak. Well, what you think? We start with those Mexicans?"

"I mean, that's my first guess. So we have two guys out here, John, and John's truck over there. No other car, so maybe a getaway driver? They came, maybe gonna rob the place? Then John drives by and notices, stops and confronts them, and they start shooting? No evidence of the other car though. No tire tracks. And Gary never installed any security cameras outside, so can't lean on that."

Aaron continued to survey the scene, moving closer to another body.

"We couldn't find any evidence of other shots fired either. No casings. No damage to the dumpster or nearby trees from stray bullets. So maybe one of 'em shoots first," Jason speculated, "and hits John. John fires back, hits both to stop 'em from robbing the store. They've all been hit and bleed out."

"But think about it. John has a headshot. That's instant. How would he have time to shoot one man, let alone two?" Aaron replied.

"Damn, man, I dunno. Maybe he shot 'em first, and the one who was gut-shot still had time to shoot back and hit John's head?"

"But it's hard to think that John would fire first," Aaron said. "Unless something spooked him. But he's been doin' this a long time. He wouldn't make a mistake like that."

"Yeah, that is hard to believe. I wonder if we're missing something here."

A man approached them from behind, and Aaron knew who it would be, based on the deliberateness of the footsteps. Aaron rose to his feet to turn around and meet Hodge Ledford, the town's lone detective from the police department. A large, grizzled, and imposing figure who commanded the attention of everyone at the scene. Nothing Hodge did was subtle.

"Well, I'm glad I'm here to make up for this amateur hour I guess we're doin'." Hodge looked Aaron up and down, brow cocked. Hodge always had a problem with Aaron's youth, and he took every opportunity to let everyone know how he felt, including Aaron.

Now, Hodge's abrasiveness was heightened due to the circumstances—his friend of many years lying dead in front of him. Hodge had known Sheriff Dell since they worked together on the town's police force as young officers right out of the academy in the early '70s.

Both men loved their jobs, with Hodge being promoted but actively avoiding any positions within the department higher than detective.

"Too much political bullshit," is what he would say when asked if he wanted to ever move up.

John, on the other hand, liked the people aspect of the job, which ultimately led him to run for the Sheriff's Office. Shaking hands at fundraisers became second nature to him, and everyone thought he did a good job of making the county feel safe.

"Hodge, I, um, know you two were good friends. You don't have to do this right now…"

Aaron let his voice trail off as the angry slash of Hodge's hand indicated he should cease speaking.

"Don't!" Hodge said. "I'm more pissed off than anything. So don't think I need to go home and cry. John's lying here with his brains hanging out, and I want to find out why these assholes did this."

"Okay. Well, something ain't adding up right here, if you ask me."

"Let's hear it, then," Hodge responded.

"I was just looking at it here with Jason, and I don't see how John could have killed these guys, unless he shot first. I mean, he was hit square in the head, so there's no way he could have got off two rounds on these guys. Hell, not even one. So that means either we have someone else who shot first, who left the scene, or John started shooting before anyone else. And it would be hard to believe he'd do something like that."

Hodge bristled at Aaron's suggestion of even the possibility that John would do something rash like discharging his gun without being fired at first. He took it as an offense in respect to his long-time friend, and puffed up his chest before responding.

"Hold up one damn second. I don't like what you're sayin' here. I've known John for decades, and there ain't no way he fired his gun like some rookie (Hodge again looked Aaron up and down when saying it). By the way, I'm the town's detective here, so this is my scene. Last I checked we're in city limits, so the Mapleview Police Department is going to be handling this. I don't care if the Sheriff's Office got here first."

"Actually, county jurisdiction runs everywhere in Souter County,

city limits included," Aaron said, keeping his voice even. "But you're welcome to lead."

Hodge's jaw worked like he wanted to argue the point anyway, but he let it go, satisfied he'd won something.

Aaron wasn't surprised that Hodge would try to control the crime scene, but it did take him off guard that he was already competing for who would take on the investigation. By long custom, town police handled crimes within a municipality's limits, while the Sheriff's Office covered the rest of the county—even though the law didn't actually draw that line, departments rarely crossed it without good reason. Aaron didn't want to escalate the issue any further by arguing, but knew he'd have to fight for his small Sheriff's Office not to be pushed out.

"Hodge, that's not just some random guy lying here," Aaron said. "That's the Sheriff. That's my boss. I'm not gonna stay on the sidelines on this one. But let's talk about that later, okay? Right now we have to figure out how to work toward the goal of finding out the truth of what happened here. For John's sake."

That last part eased Hodge just a bit, and he relaxed his body. For one of the only times in his life, he didn't quite know what to say. Maybe he was starting to feel the gravity of seeing his friend on the ground at his feet. An awkward silence fell. After a few seconds, Jason broke it.

"So, um, where we gonna start?"

"We're gonna start with the goddamn Mexicans," replied Hodge.

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Coffee was poured into small white styrofoam cups for the members of both Souter County's Sheriff's Office and the Mapleview Police Department, even though it was past midnight. The two headquarters sat across the street from each other, and people from both buildings commingled on a regular basis, but tonight was different. Rarely would so many officers be in these places at once and at this time of the night.

Aaron bobbed and weaved through the crowd in the Sheriff's Office hallway, attempting to keep his coffee steady, his attention divided between all of the others peppering him with questions about what had happened and his own intent toward his destination. Aaron could hear the overlapping conversations and tried to answer the most important questions and ignore the ones that amounted to gossip fodder of people merely wanting to be in the know.

"He's now at the morgue."

"There was no reason to take him to the hospital. John was already dead at the scene."

"I don't know who's contacting his wife. Wouldn't know how to get in touch with her now that she's moved to Ohio."

These were just some of the answers that Aaron gave while still making his way to a small utility closet. Just as he reached the door to open it, June, the office secretary, entered the building from the back entrance.

"June, I'm so glad you're here," Aaron said, relieved. She was the first person in this building that all of a sudden had his full attention.

June, a gray-haired staple of the Sheriff's Office, was affectionately referred to as "Mom" by the officers. Even by the late John Dell too. She had been there longer than anyone else on the force and was seen as one of the most important people, even if she didn't have a badge. She knew the ins and outs of every part of the office and the staff, so of course she was called to come in on the night that the Sheriff was murdered.

All of the officers in the hallway barely noticed her except for Aaron, who immediately understood the significance of her presence. This woman had worked with John for nearly his entire career. It was understandable that tears had welled up in her eyes.

Without saying a word, June walked forward, hugged Aaron, and began crying. That got everyone's attention and ceased the commotion. He held her for a few moments to let her express her grief.

"What in the Lord's name happened?" June said through tears.

"We don't know exactly. But I was the one who found him. At

the gas station near Poplar Park."

"Is it true he was shot?"

"It is. We think he died instantly. Woodfin's gonna look at him in the morning."

"What was he doing there?"

"We don't know, but I was hoping you'd help me try to find out. We still keep the …"

"… keys in the closet? Yes, sir, we do," June answered, finishing Aaron's question for him.

Aaron opened the door for the two of them to rummage through boxes of paper and office supplies. After shifting stacks of paper on shelving, June announced she had found what they were looking for. They exited and walked a few steps down the hallway to the locked door where one young officer was trying to pick the lock.

"Git over." June shooed him away and placed the key in the slot, turned it and swung the door open. "What are we looking for?"

"Anything that tells us what John was doing there tonight. Any kind of clue," Aaron answered while opening desk drawers and glancing at papers. "He didn't tell you anything about what he was doing tonight, June?"

"Not a word. You know him. He is … was … so shut off to everyone. Even me. There was a time years ago when he was more open, but those days are long gone. He only shared with me his comin's and goin's if it related to the job. His personal life, or whatever was left of it, wasn't known by anyone, far as I know."

June had joined in the search as other officers gathered around the door to watch.

"I set up a hotline," Deputy Malik said. "Now we're tellin' folks to call in if they have any information. Maybe it'll keep the main office line from ringin' off the hook." Deputy Malik watched Aaron, hoping he'd take note of his initiative.

"I don't think we'll get any quality leads from that," Aaron responded, not looking up at the officer.

June looked up and got in Aaron's sightline to silently tell him

with her facial expression that he should be more appreciative.

"I mean, uh, good thinking, Malik," Aaron said. "Way to take initiative. We need it in times like this." The man's face changed from disappointment at the Deputy Sheriff's first response, to pride upon hearing his second one.

"I'm just so out of sorts right now," admitted Aaron to June while still shuffling through the Sheriff's belongings—typical office items one would set on a desk. The rolodex. Reports stuffed into file folders. "And exhausted. I was on my way home when I got the call."

"You know," June said, "I realize everyone and their mama here is going to want answers as soon as possible, but I don't think people staying up through the night will be of any use. We need to all be at our best for what's comin' tomorrow, and that starts with some sleep."

"You're right, as always, June. I think some of these men can go on home. I'll tell 'em."

"I wasn't just talkin' about them, sir."

Aaron paused his frantic searching to look up at June. She held his glance with a "you know I'm right" expression until he relented. He eventually nodded his head in agreement. "Maybe I'll just go try to get some sleep on the break room couch."

"That ol' thang?" June said. "Those cushions haven't had any padding in them since the early '80s. You wouldn't get a lick of sleep. Go home, Aaron."

"Yes, ma'am," Aaron said, followed by an involuntary yawn. "I guess all this stuff will be here in the morning."

Officers peppered him with more questions as he walked down the hall toward the exit. Hodge then stepped out of one of the rooms to see him walking toward the door with his car keys in his hand.

"Oh, is that how it is? Your boss is laying up on a metal table, cold, and you need to get home for some beauty sleep?"

The other members of the force all quieted to see how Aaron would respond, and because they were all a bit scared of Hodge.

"Now I …" Aaron didn't finish his response. June wouldn't let him.

"Hodge Ledford!" she hollered. "I know you didn't just talk down to the Deputy Sheriff like that. And you know that come tomorrow he'll be the actual Sheriff. So show some respect. I told him to go home. He needs some rest. You do, too. Ain't nothing y'all can do about John right now in the middle of the night. Now you best see to it that you don't give him no more trouble."

The other officers in the building simultaneously shifted their heads back to Hodge to see his response.

"June, I think you need to …"

"Don't be tellin' me what I need to do," June interrupted him, standing as tall as her small frame would allow. "Hush up."

"Yes, ma'am," Hodge said while pointing his chin down to the floor, knowing that June was the last person he wanted to pick a fight with.

Aaron and Hodge exchanged looks—Hodge indignant, Aaron smirking to acknowledge what they both knew to be true. June was not one to be trifled with. He resumed his walk out to his car to head home, hoping that he may be able to get a couple hours of sleep before the next day began. "Mom" was right—tomorrow they would all be living in a different world.

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Since coming back to the States from overseas, Aaron had been staying in an apartment above Mr. Fulton's garage until he saved up enough for his own house. He could probably afford to rent an actual apartment, but he liked the fact he was helping out Mr. Fulton, both financially and by doing maintenance around the property.

The garage apartment hadn't changed since the '80s, when it was added for the owner's son, before he eloped and moved to the Midwest. Mr. Fulton had relied on his own skills too much and didn't take much effort to update it since. The kitchen still had its original avocado-green stove. A window unit rattled in the frame, working overtime against the summer heat and doing little more than pushing

the warm air around the room. The carpet, a flat brown shag, was worn down to the backing in a path from the door to the couch. Leaky faucets, thin wood-paneled walls with a few holes here and there, and a mildew smell that permeated the entire space still didn't make it the shabbiest place Aaron had lived. A single shelf by the door held his few books and a stack of mail he hadn't gotten around to opening.

Aaron stepped into the tiny bathroom to splash some water on his face. He dried it with a towel and raised his head to face himself in the mirror. When he was a teenager, people had always commented on how young he looked for his age. Not anymore. Not since returning to Mapleview. Perhaps his face had finally caught up with his age. Or maybe it was the weathering from his time in the Army. He leaned in for a closer look. Buried in his dark brown hair was a single strand of gray. He sighed at his reflection.

Aaron was thankful to collapse into bed. He needed to take advantage of these few hours before he'd need to get up and return to the station. He closed his eyes, but his mind refused to stop dwelling on his last call of the night. The one that could not only change the course of his life but also the place he called home.

Souter County was a rural part of the state with a smattering of small towns, Mapleview being the largest and the county seat. Many areas of the county were either untouched or used as farmland, bordered by the Appalachian Mountains to the west. The range authored the topography of the entire area as the ground slowly and gradually sloped down and flattened from one edge of the county to the other. The foothills, as most called the area, still had its small mountains and giant hills as a part of that transition, with Mapleview sitting right in the middle of the county.

Being a Deputy Sheriff here meant that Aaron spent most of his days driving around and taking assignments of varying degrees of gravity. The occasional domestic dispute. Some drunk driving. Lots of misunderstandings. But the area was not without more serious criminal offenses, like the rise of meth houses in the more secluded parts of the county.

Aaron hadn't dealt with those situations much, as the former Sheriff, John Dell, had relegated the more mundane and routine calls to Aaron, which he preferred. This was what he wanted: to return to his hometown after his tour in the Army and live a simpler life.

Today had shaped up to be just another day until he found himself at the Quik-Save. Earlier, he had paid a visit to the Renfros' house, where Billy had an argument with his wife, prompting the neighbors to call the Sheriff's Office. This was not the first. He and Ivey had a habit of arguing on their back deck without any reservations about whether or not the neighbors around them could hear.

This time it was about Ivey staying out too late the previous night, "hangin' on Steven" at the dive down Highway 60, according to Billy. But after calming everyone down, Aaron didn't see anything else he could do, much less in terms of law enforcement.

*There's no law against arguing, I guess,* he had thought to himself afterward. But in the back of his mind, he made a note to always take a look at Ivey's arms whenever he saw her in the future. It was odd that on a day in July with temperatures above 90 degrees, Ivey was wearing a long-sleeved shirt.

His next call involved talking to a concerned mother, Sherry Simmons, about a neighbor being too nice to her daughter. As soon as she'd answered the door upon his arrival, she'd shoved a pocketbook into his chest.

After hearing about Mr. Craig down the street giving her daughter the pocketbook for her birthday, Aaron had assured her it was probably nothing and further annoyed her by saying it wasn't a crime to give birthday gifts, even with the age gap.

"Are you serious?" Ms. Simmons had said. "You think it's okay for a man in his forties to be giving little girls things like this?"

"But has he ever done or said anything really inappropriate to your daughter?" Aaron had asked.

"I think telling a young teen girl that you like their shirt isn't right."

"Sure. But I mean really inappropriate?" Aaron asked.

"Well, I asked Kristin, and she said no, he's never said anything …

sexual … to her. But he shouldn't be giving her pocketbooks. It ain't right," Ms. Simmons said.

"If you want to give me the purse, I can take it back over to Craig's and let him know she didn't want it," Aaron said.

"Well … she likes it, so I won't do anything like that," Ms. Simmons said. "I guess I'll just talk to her."

Aaron left proud of himself for calming her down, but something she told him as he opened his car door to leave stuck with him.

"He don't ev'r give the boys anything for their birthdays."

A backlog of paperwork rounded out the rest of his day at the station, which caused him to be at work late. He had lost track of time and been so focused on catching up on all the reports and administrative work that came with the job. It was as he was heading home when he received the report of gunshots being heard around the gas station and made the decision to be the one to investigate. He thought about the coincidence of all the law enforcement officers—22 total—in the town, and that he was the one who had found his boss dead in that parking lot.

*Does trouble just find me? I thought I was leaving that behind,* he pondered. He remembered his time overseas. The desert. The heat. The gunfire. The blood. The memory of another soldier lying with his arm and legs in shreds. Waking up in the Army field hospital.

*This can't be my last thought before falling asleep,* he decided. He knew it would result in hauntingly familiar dreams. The nearby guitar might take his mind off of bloodied bodies.

Aaron sat up, propped himself up against the headboard, pulled out a nearby laptop, and grabbed his guitar. He started some music from the computer. Sometimes he played the instrument in his church's Sunday worship service, so he was learning a new song that he'd been asked to play this coming weekend. "Be Thou My Vision," a hymn he had only recently come to know, came from the speakers. Aaron began strumming along while attempting to sing it, hoping it would calm his mind.

*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,*
*Be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;*
*Be thou my best thought in the day and the night,*
*Both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.*

Even though the church choir would do the singing and his role was only to provide the guitar rhythm, the specific talent of playing an instrument and singing at the same time had always eluded him, as if his brain wouldn't allow him to do the two things at once. It was one or the other. If he concentrated too much on the vocals, his hand stopped strumming, and vice versa. Attempts to reconcentrate on the guitar meant the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. But he wanted to challenge himself to figure it out. Tonight, though, was not the night to do it. Thoughts of John Dell's dead body flashed through his mind. Then thoughts of the desert. For a moment, just before he caught himself, he saw it in his head: a long hallway, dark at the far end, with a door he had no interest in walking toward.

Soon, he was doing neither the strumming nor the singing well. Despite his beliefs, the lyrics rang hollow at this moment. He couldn't get past the day's events. Eventually exhaustion took over as he drifted to sleep, guitar in his hands, now certain to dream about either what happened to him in Iraq or tonight in Mapleview.

His final thoughts before slumber set in were about how his world had changed today in that gas station parking lot. He had lost a boss. The town had lost its Sheriff. He wondered why. He wondered who would have done it. He pondered his next steps and what his life would be like tomorrow, and what challenges lay ahead. The laptop continued playing as he drifted.

*Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;*
*Be thou my whole armor, be thou my true might;*
*Be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:*
*O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.*