

The No. 1 Bestselling Author

Kathy REICHS

SPEAKING
IN
BONES

The image shows a forest floor covered in a thick layer of brown pine needles. The title 'SPEAKING IN BONES' is spelled out in large, rustic letters made of sticks and twine. The word 'SPEAKING' is on the top line, 'IN' is on the middle line, and 'BONES' is on the bottom line. Two red sneakers with white laces are placed on the forest floor, one to the left of the word 'IN' and one to the right of the word 'BONES'. The background consists of tall, thin trees with some autumn-colored leaves visible in the upper part of the frame.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Please don't kill me. Please don't kill me. Please. Kill me.

When forensic anthropologist Dr Tempe Brennan is approached by amateur detective Hazel 'Lucky' Strike, at first she is inclined to dismiss the woman's claims that she's matched a previously unidentified set of remains with a name.

But as the words of a terrified young woman echo round her office from an audio recorder found near where the bones were discovered, something about the story won't let Tempe go.

As Tempe investigates further she finds herself involved in a case more complicated and horrifying than she could ever have imagined . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATHY REICHS is the author of seventeen *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestselling novels featuring forensic anthropologist Temperance Brennan. Like her protagonist, Reichs is a forensic anthropologist—one of fewer than one hundred ever certified by the American Board of Forensic Anthropology. A professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, she is a former vice president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and serves on the National Police Services Advisory Council in Canada. Reichs's own life, as much as her novels, is the basis for the TV show *Bones*, one of the longest-running series in the history of the FOX network.

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Death du Jour
Deadly Décisions
Fatal Voyage
Grave Secrets
Bare Bones
Monday Mourning
Cross Bones
Break No Bones
Bones to Ashes
Devil Bones
206 Bones
Spider Bones (published as Mortal Remains in hardback in
the UK)
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Bones Are Forever
Bones of the Lost
Bones Never Lie

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Kathy **REICHS**

SPEAKING IN BONES



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

*For
Cooper Eldridge Mixon,
born July 14, 2014*

CHAPTER 1

"I'M UNBOUND NOW. My wrists and ankles burn from the straps. My ribs are bruised and there's a lump behind my ear. I don't remember hitting my head. I'm lying very still because my whole body aches. Like I've been in a wreck. Like the time I crashed my bike. Why doesn't my family save me? Is no one missing me? I have only my family. No friends. It was just too hard. I'm all alone. So alone. How long have I been here? Where is here? The whole world is slipping away. Everything. Everyone. Am I awake or asleep? Am I dreaming or is this real? Is it day or night?

"When they return they will hurt me again. Why? Why is this happening to me? I can't hear a sound. No. That's not true. I can hear my heart beating. Blood working inside my ears. I taste something bitter. Probably vomit stuck in my teeth. I smell cement. My own sweat. My dirty hair. I hate when my hair isn't washed. I'm gonna open my eyes now. Got one. The other's crusted shut. Can't see much. It's all blurry, like I'm looking up from way down underwater.

"I hate the waiting. That's when the pictures take over my brain. Not sure if they're memories or hallucinations. I see him. Always in black, his face crazy red and beaded with sweat. I avoid his eyes. Keep looking at his shoes. Shiny shoes. The candle flame's a little yellow worm dancing on the leather. He stands over me, all big and

nasty. Thrusts his horrid, smelly face close to mine. I feel his icky breath on my skin. He gets mad and yanks me by the hair. His veins go all bulgy. He screams and his words sound like they're coming from another planet. Or like I've left my body and I'm listening from far away. I see his hand coming at me, clutching the thing so tight it quivers. I know I'm shaking but I'm numb. Or am I dead?

"No! Not now! Don't let it happen now!"

"My hands are going all cold and tingly. I shouldn't be talking about him. I shouldn't have said he was horrid."

"Yes. They're coming."

"Why is this happening to me? What did I do? I've always tried to be good. Tried to do what Mama said. Don't let them kill me! Mama, please don't let them kill me!"

"My mind is going all fuzzy. I have to stop talking."

Silence, then the click-creak of a door opening. Closing. Footsteps, unhurried, firm on the floor.

"Take your place."

"No!"

"Don't resist me."

"Leave me alone!"

The cadence of frantic breathing.

The thunk of a blow.

"Please don't kill me."

"Do as I say."

Sobbing.

Sound as if dragging.

Moaning. Rhythmic.

"Are you in my hands?"

"Filthy bitch!" Louder, deeper.

A soft rasp.

The *tic* of metal snapping into place.

"You will die, slut!"

"Will you answer me now?"

"Whore!"

The drumming of agitated fingers. Scratching.

"Give me what I need!"

Pfff! The violent hurling of spit.

"You will not answer?"

Moaning.

"This has only begun."

Click-creak. The furious slam of a door.

Absolute stillness. Soft sobbing.

"Please don't kill me.

"Please don't kill me.

"Please.

"Kill me."

CHAPTER 2

THE WOMAN'S KNUCKLES bulged pale under skin that was cracked and chapped. Using one knobby finger, she depressed a button on the object in the Ziploc.

The room went still.

I sat motionless, the hairs on my neck lifted like grass in a breeze.

The woman's eyes stayed hard on mine. They were green flecked with yellow, and made me think of a cat. A cat that could bide, then pounce with deadly accuracy.

I let the silence stretch. Partly to calm my own nerves. Mostly to encourage the woman to explain the purpose of her visit. I had flight reservations in just a few hours. So much to do before heading to the airport. To Montreal and Ryan. I didn't need this. But I had to know the meaning of the terrible sounds I'd just heard.

The woman remained angled forward in her chair. Tense. Expectant. She was tall, at least six feet, and wore boots, jeans, and a denim shirt with the cuffs rolled up her lower arms. Her hair was dyed the color of the clay at Roland Garros. She'd yanked it into a bun high on her head.

My eyes broke free from the cat-gaze and drifted to the wall at the woman's back. To a framed certificate declaring Temperance Brennan a diplomate of the American Board of

Forensic Anthropology. D-ABFA. The exam had been a bitch.

I was alone with my visitor in the 120 square feet allocated to the Mecklenburg County Medical Examiner's consulting forensic anthropologist. I'd left the door open. Not sure why. Usually I close it. Something about the woman made me uneasy.

Familiar workplace sounds drifted in from the corridor. A ringing phone. A cooler door whooshing open then clicking shut. A rubber-wheeled gurney rolling toward an autopsy suite.

"I'm sorry." I was pleased that my voice sounded calm. "The receptionist provided your name but I've misplaced my note."

"Strike. Hazel Strike."

That caused a little ping in my brain. What?

"Folks call me Lucky."

I said nothing.

"But I never rely on luck. I work hard at what I do." Though I guessed Strike's age at somewhere north of sixty, her voice was still twentysomething strong. The accent suggested she was probably local.

"And what is it you do, Ms. Strike?"

"Mrs. My husband passed six years back."

"I'm sorry."

"He knew the risk, chose to smoke." Slight lift of one shoulder. "You pay the price."

"What is it you do?" I repeated, wanting to draw Strike back on point.

"Send the dead home."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I match bodies to people gone missing."

"That is the task of law enforcement in conjunction with coroners and medical examiners," I said.

"And you pros nail it every time."

I bit back another priggish response. Strike had a point. Stats I'd read put the number of missing persons in the United States at around 90,000 at any given time, the number of unidentified remains from the past fifty years at more than 40,000. The last count I saw placed the North Carolina UID total at 115.

"How can I help you, Mrs. Strike?"

"Lucky."

"Lucky."

Strike placed the Ziploc beside a bright yellow case file on my blotter. In it was a gray plastic rectangle, roughly one inch wide, two inches long, and a half inch thick. A metal ring at one end suggested dual functions as a recorder and a key chain. A loop of faded denim suggested the device had once hung from the waistband of a pair of jeans. "Impressive little gizmo," Strike said. "Voice activated. Two-gigabyte internal flash memory. Sells for less than a hundred bucks."

The yellow folder called to me. Accusingly. Two months earlier a man had died in his recliner, TV remote clutched in one hand. The previous weekend his mummified corpse had been found by a very unhappy landlord. I needed to wrap this up and get back to my analysis. Then home to packing and the delivery of my cat to the neighbor.

But those voices. My pulse was still struggling to return to normal. I waited.

"The recording lasts almost twenty-three minutes. But the five you heard is plenty to get the drift." Strike gave a tight shake of her head. Which reangled the bun to an off-center tilt. "Scares the patootie out of you, don't it?"

"The audio is disturbing." An understatement.

"Ya think?"

"Perhaps you should play it for the police."

"I'm playing it for you, Doc."

"I believe I heard three voices?" Curiosity was overcoming my reticence to engage. And apprehension.

"That's my take. Two men and the girl."

"What was happening?"

"Don't know."

"Who was speaking?"

"Only got a theory on one."

"And that is?"

"Can we back up a bit?"

I brushed my eyes past my watch. Not as discreetly as I thought.

"Unless you're not 'tasked' with sticking names on the dead." Strike hooked sarcastic finger quotes around the term I'd used moments earlier.

I leaned back and assumed my listening face.

"What do you know about websleuthing?"

So that was it. I vowed to keep my tone patient, but my answers short.

"Websleuths are amateurs competing online to solve cold cases." Wannabe forensic scientists and cops. Overzealous viewers of *NCIS*, *Cold Case*, *CSI*, and *Bones*. I didn't add that.

Strike's brows drew together over her nose. They were dark and looked wrong with the pale skin and fake carrot hair. She studied me a very long time before responding.

"Most people die, they get a funeral, a wake, a memorial service. There are eulogies, an obit in the paper. Some get holy cards showing their faces with angels or saints or whatnot. You're really hot stuff, maybe there's a school or a bridge named in your honor. That's what's supposed to happen. That's how we deal with death. By recognizing a person's achievements in life.

"But what happens when someone just disappears? Poof." Strike curled then exploded her fingers. "A man leaves for work and vanishes? A woman boards a bus and never gets off?"

I started to speak but Strike rolled on.

“And what happens when a body turns up lacking ID? On a roadside, in a pond, bundled in a carpet and stashed in a shed?”

“As I’ve stated, that is the job of police and medical examiners. At this facility we do everything possible to ensure that all human remains are identified, no matter the circumstances or their condition.”

“That might be true here. But you know as well as I do it’s a crapshoot elsewhere. A corpse might luck out, be examined for scars, piercings, tattoos, old trauma, get printed and sampled for DNA. A decomp or a skeleton might end up with an expert like you, have its teeth charted, its sex, age, race, and height entered into a database. Another jurisdiction, similar remains might get a quick once-over then storage in a freezer, maybe a back room or basement. A nameless body might be held a few weeks, maybe a few days, then cremated or buried in a potter’s field.”

“Mrs. Strike—”

“Lost. Murdered. Dumped. Unclaimed. This country’s overflowing with the forgotten dead. And somewhere someone’s wondering about each and every one of those souls.”

“And websleuthing is a way to solve the problem.”

“Darn right.” Strike shoved her sleeves hard up her arms, as though the cuffs had suddenly grown too tight on her flesh.

“I see.”

“Do you? Have you ever visited a websleuthing site?”

“No.”

“You know what goes on in those forums?”

Recognizing the question as rhetorical, I offered no response.

“UIDs are tagged with cute little nicknames. Princess Doe. The Lady of the Dunes. Tent Girl. Little Miss Panasoffkee. Baby Hope.”

The ping exploded into a full-firing synapse.

"You identified Old Bernie," I said.

Old Bernie was a partial skeleton found by hikers in 1974 behind a shelter on the Neusiok Trail in the Croatan National Forest. The remains were sent to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, in those days located in Chapel Hill, and were determined to be those of an elderly white male. A New Bern detective assigned to the case had no luck in establishing ID.

For years the skeleton remained in a box in an OCME storeroom. Somewhere along the way it came to be known as Old Bernie, named for New Bern, the town closest to the point of the old man's discovery.

Articles ran at the time Old Bernie turned up—in Raleigh, Charlotte, New Bern, and surrounding towns. The case was featured again, with the photo of a facial reconstruction, in the New Bern *Sun Journal* on March 24, 2004, the thirtieth anniversary of the gentleman's discovery. No one ever came forward to claim the bones.

In 2007, a technician at the OCME mentioned the case to me. I agreed to take a look.

I concurred that the remains were those of an edentulous African American who had died between the ages of sixty-five and eighty. But I took issue with one of my predecessor's key findings and suggested the victim's nickname be changed from Bernie to Bernice. The pelvic features were clearly those of a female.

I took samples for possible DNA testing, then Old Bernie went back to her cardboard carton in Chapel Hill. The following year, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, NamUs, came online. NamUs, a database for unidentified remains, in cop lingo UIDs, and missing persons, in cop lingo MPs, is free and available to everyone. I entered case descriptors into the section for UIDs. Soon amateur websleuths were swarming like flies.

"Yep," Strike said. "That was me."

"How did you do it?"

"Pure doggedness."

"That's vague."

"I scanned a billion pictures on NamUs and other sites listing MPs. Made a lot of calls, asking about old ladies missing their teeth. Came up blank on both fronts. Then I went offline, pulled up stories in local papers, talked to cops in New Bern and Craven County, the park rangers at Croatan, that kind of thing. Nothing.

"On a hunch I started phoning old folks' homes. Found a facility in Havelock had a patient disappear in 1972. Charity Dillard. The administrator reported Dillard missing, but no one really made much effort. The home is close to a boat ramp, so they figured Dillard fell into the lake and drowned. When Old Bernie turned up two years later, no one paid attention because the skeleton was supposed to be that of a man. End of story."

"Until you made the link." I'd heard about the ID through the state ME grapevine.

"Dillard had one living grandson, out in L.A. He provided a swab. Your bone samples yielded DNA. Case closed."

"Where is Dillard now?"

"Kid popped for a headstone. Even flew east for the burial."

"Nice job."

"It wasn't right, her gathering dust in a box." Again the shoulder shrug.

I now knew why Strike was sitting in my office.

"You've come about unidentified remains," I said.

"Yes, ma'am."

I angled two palms in a "go on" gesture.

"Cora Teague. Eighteen-year-old white female. Disappeared up in Avery County three and a half years back."

"Was Teague reported missing?"

"Not officially."

"What does that mean?"

"No one filed an MP report. I found her on a websleuthing site. The family believes she took off on her own."

"You've spoken to the family?"

"I have."

"Is that a common part of websleuthing?"

"Something's happened to this kid and no one's doing dink."

"Have you contacted the local authorities?"

"Eighteen makes her adult. She can come and go as she likes. Blah. Blah. Blah."

"That's true."

Strike jerked a thumb at the Ziploc. "That sound like someone doing as she likes?"

"You think Cora Teague is the girl on that recording?"

Strike gave a slow nod of her head.

"Why bring this to me?"

"I believe you've got parts of Teague stashed here."

CHAPTER 3

"I SHOULD ASK a detective to join us."

"No." Realizing the sharpness of her tone, Strike added, "Not yet."

"Okay." For now. "Tell me about Teague."

"If you'll bear with me, I'll share what I know."

Strike did that shoulder thing again. Not a shrug, more like a slo-mo twitch. Or an unconscious attempt to readjust her spine.

"Cora was born in '93, the fourth of five kids. The father, John Teague, owns a combo convenience store-gas station-hardware-bait shop. The mother, Fatima, is a stay-at-home housewife. She sometimes works the cash register at the store.

"The older brother, Owen Lee, and the two older sisters, Marie and Veronica, are married. He sold real estate, badly, until the bottom fell out, then started a dog-training business. The sisters both live out of state. Not sure about Eli. He's the youngest. Guess he'd be about nineteen. Owen Lee and the parents live within miles of each other up in Avery County."

The Blue Ridge Mountains. Unbidden, an image of Mama flashed and was gone.

I nodded to indicate I was listening.

"According to a posting on CLUES.net, about three and a half years back Cora mysteriously vanished."

"CLUES.net?"

"Citizens Looking Under Every Stone. The site permits anyone to post about a missing person. It's like NamUs, only privately hosted."

"You found a listing on CLUES for Cora Teague." I wanted to be sure I was getting this straight.

"Yes."

"Who posted it?"

"There it gets tricky." Strike planted an elbow on each thigh and let her hands dangle between her knees. "CLUES allows users complete anonymity."

"Is that standard for websleuthing sites?"

"No. But the guy who runs CLUES thinks folks will be more likely to come forward with information if they're not required to identify themselves."

"So a user doesn't have to provide a name to post an MP or to participate in a forum discussion."

"Correct. And those listed as missing don't have to have gone through official channels."

"Meaning a police report is not required." This was sounding flaky.

"You've got it. So not every MP has an investigating agency attached. When that's the case, the site operator acts as a clearinghouse for tips."

"So any wingnut on the planet can enter any rubbish he or she wants."

"It's not quite that loose." Defensive.

"But you have no idea who listed Teague."

"Do you want to hear this?"

"Go on."

"Since Cora Teague was never officially reported as missing, her case got zero media coverage. And no attention on the site. I figured if she had turned up dead somewhere, and she was in some database of unidentified

remains, no one was working to match her up. She was all mine."

"Your challenge."

"Yep."

"And you like a challenge." I was starting to get a really bad vibe.

"Something wrong with that?"

"So what happened?"

"According to the posting, Teague dropped off the radar midsummer of 2011."

"Her LSA?" I used the acronym for last seen alive.

"Avery County. That's about as much as anyone knows."

"Did Teague have an Internet presence?"

"None that I could find. No Facebook, Twitter. No email addresses. No use of Buzznet, Blogster, Foursquare, LinkedIn. No iTunes—"

"Cellphone?"

"No."

An eighteen-year-old kid with no cellphone? That sounded odd. "You spoke to the family. What do they say?"

"They believe she ran off with her boyfriend."

"That's often the case."

"I talked to a few folks up that way. The picture I got doesn't track with that theory."

"How so?"

"Teague was a loner. Not the dating type. And I found not one single solitary person ever heard of or laid eyes on a boyfriend. No BFF. No neighbor. No bus driver. No coach."

"Just the family."

"Just them."

"Who is he?"

"They don't know. Or don't say."

"So she kept the relationship secret. Kids do that."

"Hard to pull it off in the sticks. And Teague moved in a very small circle. Family. Home. Church."

"Perhaps she met the boy at school."

Strike shook her head. "No way, according to those I contacted."

"Was Teague a good student?"

"Not really. She attended a Catholic school for the lower and middle grades. Managed to graduate from Avery County High. No one there remembers much about her. She was on no sports team, participated in no extracurricular activities. The woman I spoke with, a guidance counselor I think, said she was dropped off and picked up daily by a sibling or parent."

"Wait. You called the school?"

"Claimed I was helping the family."

Jesus. This woman was something.

"One odd twist." Strike continued, oblivious to my disapproval. "Teague's not pictured in the yearbook."

"There could be any number of reasons for that. She'd had a bad hair day and hated the shot. She was out sick when photos were taken."

"Maybe. The guidance counselor said Teague's record indicates chronic absenteeism."

"Any history of problems with alcohol or drugs?"

"Nope."

"Any juvie record?"

"I don't know. After graduation, she took a job as a nanny. Lasted a few months, then got sent packing."

"Why?"

"Health issues."

"What sort of health issues?"

"No one would say."

"Where did Teague go?"

"Home."

I waited for Strike to continue. She didn't.

"Let me get this straight. Cora Teague hasn't been seen in over three and a half years."

"That's right."

"But an MP report was never filed with the police."

"Correct."

"The family believes she left on her own."

"They do."

"But you think that's unlikely."

"Me and whoever posted her name on CLUES."

I nodded, acknowledging she had a point.

"You suspect Cora Teague's voice is on that recording."
Indicating the Ziploc.

"I do."

"You think she was killed and dumped. And that part of her body was recovered and sent to this lab."

"I'm suggesting you consider the possibility."

"What makes you think Teague is at this facility?"

"About a year and a half ago, you made an entry on NamUs detailing a partial torso found in Burke County. Burke is right down the road from Avery. The time line fits. The geography fits. The descriptors fit." Strike straightened and spread her arms wide. "Call me crazy, but I think it's worth a look-see."

A specimen cart rattled by in the hall. A door opened, releasing the whine of an autopsy saw cutting through bone. Closed abruptly, truncating the sound.

In my head I heard the wretched little voice on the tape.

Please don't kill me.

Please.

Kill me.

As before, I felt a chill crawl up my spine.

"How did this come into your possession?" Gesturing at the key chain recorder.

Strike leaned back into her chair.

"As I said, I kept scanning sites listing UIDs, hoping a set of remains might link to Cora Teague. Nothing ever did. Then I got side-tracked by personal matters. Had to let it go for a while."

Strike paused, perhaps pondering the unnamed matters that had temporarily halted her search.

"Last week, I got back to sleuthing. When I spotted your entry on NamUs it was like harps burst into tune. You know. Like on TV."

I didn't. But I nodded.

"Your entry included information on where the torso was found, so I decided what the heck? It's not a long drive. Why not go up and poke around?"

"You went to Burke County? Seriously?"

"I did. Once I got there, it seemed obvious there was only one place a person in a hurry would off-load a body from that overlook. I walked a pattern downhill from the spot. For hours, turned up nothing but bugs. I was about to quit when I spotted a key chain wedged in the roots of a big old tree. Figured the thing was probably there by happenstance. But, being safe, I brought it home."

Strike's mouth squashed up to one side, and she went silent.

"You discovered the recording function and played the audio," I suggested.

"Yeah." Tight.

"And then?"

"And then I called you."

A very long silence stretched between us. I broke it, using carefully chosen words.

"Mrs. Strike, I'm impressed with your enthusiasm. And with your commitment to the goal of returning nameless victims to their families. But—"

"You can't discuss the specifics of a case."

"That's correct."

"About what I expected." Strike took a quick breath and set her jaw. Preparing to argue? Or to accept rejection?

"But I promise you," I said, "I will look into the situation."

"Yeah." Strike gave a humorless sniff of a laugh. "Don't let the door smack your arse on the way out."

Strike snatched up the Ziploc and pushed to her feet.

I rose. "If you leave the key chain, I will ask someone at the crime lab to evaluate the audio."

Strike repeated the mirthless snort. She really had it down. "I don't think so." Dropping the Ziploc into her pack.

I extended a hand. "I will call you. One way or another."

Strike nodded. Shook. "I'd appreciate that. And your discretion."

I must have looked confused.

"Until an ID is confirmed, no sense getting the media in a twist."

"I never grant interviews." Unless ordered to do so by those higher up the chain of command. I didn't say that.

"I apologize. Didn't need saying. It's just, I prefer doing what's best for the family."

"Of course."

I walked Strike down the hall and watched her disappear into the lobby, all the while debating if and how to share her tale with my boss, Mecklenburg County's chief medical examiner. I knew the look Tim Larabee would give me. And the questions he'd ask.

Back at my desk, I rolled Strike's visit around in my head. Considered possibilities.

Strike was a mental case. A con artist. A shrewd detective lacking a badge.

I started with door number three. Strike was a well-meaning though somewhat overzealous websleuth. She'd found the recorder just as she'd claimed. Problems. How had the police failed to spot the thing when they recovered the torso? How had it survived out in the elements for so long?

Say the girl on the audio actually was Cora Teague. Say Strike was correct, Teague is dead and I have her remains in storage. Had the key chain been hers? Had Teague recorded her thoughts while held in some sort of brutal captivity? Had she been murdered?

I moved to an alternate explanation. Strike fabricated the whole story. Faked the audio. Problem. The scam would be quickly discovered and Strike revealed as a fraud. Why do it? Because she's nuts? Because she craves media attention? Doors one and two.

Or maybe Teague was the scammer and Strike her gullible victim. Perhaps Teague and two male companions staged the interchange on the recording, and somehow led Strike to the key chain. Teague had been in the wind for three and a half years. Perhaps she wanted to stay there. Problem. The tape sounded eerily real. The anguish in that voice would have the opposite effect on anyone who listened.

Or maybe Teague was working in league with Strike. Same question. Why? What did they hope to accomplish?

In my line of work, I encounter a range of human motivations as broad as the South China Sea. I'm pretty good at spotting deception. At assessing character. Looking back on that encounter, I'm forced to admit, I hadn't a clue what to think of Hazel "Lucky" Strike.

CHAPTER 4

I STARED AT the bright yellow file on my blotter. Larabee would be anxious for word on the mummified corpse.

I was still staring when my iPhone beeped an incoming message. The flight reminder triggered an unexpected wave of uneasiness.

Decision.

Deep breath, then I dialed. As my call winged north, I pictured Ryan and chose words to structure my argument.

Andrew Ryan, *lieutenant-déetective*, Service des enquêtes sur les crimes contre la personne, Sûreté du Québec.

Translation: Ryan works homicide for the Quebec Provincial Police. I am forensic anthropologist for the Bureau du coroner in La Belle Province. For years we have investigated murders together.

For a period, Ryan and I were also a couple. We both chose to end it. Then he chose to drop off the map. Recently, he'd chosen to return from exile and propose marriage. Months down the road, my mind was still too boggled to deal.

I pictured Ryan's face. No longer young, but the crags and furrows in all the right places. The sandy hair and electric blue eyes. Eyes that would now show disappointment.

I grinned, despite my apprehension over the upcoming conversation. Ryan had that effect on me. I really did miss him.

Ryan answered, sounding cheerful as a balloon on a string. "Madame. I have reserved a prime table for two at Milos. And organized a full range of postprandial activities. Also for two."

"Ryan—"

"'Postprandial' means after supper. Said activities will take place in the privacy of my home."

"I hate to do this, but I have to cancel."

Ryan said nothing.

"A case has come up. Two, actually. I'm sorry."

"Well, there's some things a man just can't run away from." In a bad John Wayne imitation.

"*Stagecoach*." I guessed the film. It was a game we played. "Do you want to hear about the cases?"

"Perhaps later. When can you reschedule?"

"As soon as I've finished."

A beat, then, "Tempe, deep down I fear that quote really nails it."

"What does that mean?"

"Are you sure you're bailing on this visit because of work obligations?"

"Of course it's because of work." Was it? My throat felt tight and my eyes burned. "Talk tonight?"

"Sure."

The line went dead.

I sat a moment, feeling lonely and confused. Half decided to call Ryan back to say that I'd changed my mind. Instead I dialed US Airways.

As I spoke to the agent, my eyes fell on the yellow folder. On the chair Hazel Strike had occupied.

Again, I imagined the terrified girl on the recording.

I'd bumped Ryan. Recliner Man could also wait.

But before discussing Strike with the boss, I'd check the facts. I remembered little about the case. Only that I'd done the analysis as a special request since the MCME doesn't normally investigate deaths occurring in Burke County. Couldn't recall the reason I'd been tagged for this one.

Thanks to Strike, I knew the remains had turned up approximately eighteen months earlier. And that I'd entered them into the NamUs database.

Logging on to my computer, I used the key words "Burke County" and a limiter for dates. It took just moments. The decedent had been registered at our facility as ME13-229. I pulled my report and scanned the contents.

ME13-229 arrived on August 25, 2013. The remains had been found by a hunter. By his dog, Mort, to be fair. I remembered chuckling at the irony of the name. Inappropriate, but I had.

Mort had made his macabre discovery twenty miles north of Morganton, off NC Highway 181. The bones lay downslope from an overlook, scattered over fifty square meters and covered in leaves and debris. Apparently, old Mort possessed one hell of a nose.

The investigating officer was a Burke County sheriff's deputy named Opal Ferris. It was coming back now. I recalled my surprise that Ferris had been canny enough to spot something suggesting the remains were human. That she'd bothered to walk the site to collect more. That she'd delivered Mort's booty to the local ME.

I read the section of my report titled "Postmortem Condition."

Little soft tissue had remained, the work of scavengers and nature's inevitable march. The small amount present consisted of leathery bits of ligament, enough to keep two segments of spinal column articulated. The rest had survived as isolated elements. My skeletal inventory listed eighteen partial ribs, fifteen complete and three