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IN HER
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HER POCKET



A TEMPE BRENNAN E-SHORT

KATHY REICHS

SCRIBNER

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

I CLUNG TO AN UPRIGHT as the Mule bounced and lurched, engine churning, parts rattling like a junk from the Korean War. Though the sky was overcast, it was still warm for October. I blew upward in a vain attempt to unstick hair from my forehead, unwilling to release my death grip on the four-wheel drive ATV.

However I'd pictured an artist colony, the image definitely involved more numerous and better maintained roads. This one consisted of dense forest, a cleared seam for power lines, and rough tracks spidering through bushy undergrowth. North Carolina meets Jurassic Park.

But I hadn't come to commune with nature, or to nurture the creativity of my right brain. I'd come to recover a corpse.

My plan for the day had been a nice run on Charlotte's Booty Loop, lunch with my friend Anne, and a crawl through the galleries in NoDa, the art district north of Davidson Street. I'd gotten as far as lacing my Nikes when the call came from my boss.

"It's Saturday," Anne had protested when I gave her the bad news. "Why can't it wait?"

"You want to talk details of decomp before lunch?"

"Don't they have cops for this kind of thing?"

"It's my case." As forensic anthropologist for the Mecklenburg County Medical Examiner, unidentifiable human remains were my domain. "A fibula, tibia, and two vertebrae were discovered on Mountain Island Lake a few weeks ago. Cops thought it was a missing person named Edith Blankenship."

"I heard about her on the news. College kid, right?"

"Grad student at UNCC." I referred to the University of North Carolina–Charlotte, my other employer.

"Not Edith?"

"Amelogenin testing indicated the bones came from a male," I said.

"I love it when you talk dirty."

"I still haven't ID'd the guy." John Doe was in a box at my lab. Case file: MCME-422-13. I requested a sonar scan of the cove where the bones washed ashore. Perhaps not needed now. Lots of paperwork. Small consolation.

Anne didn't congratulate me for my commitment to public service.

"The same guy who found the bones thinks he's spotted more."

"And you have to retrieve the rest of Mr. Tibia Fibula." Theatrical sigh.

"I might have time to meet you after."

"Be sure to wash your hands." Anne disconnected.

The Mule jogged left and shot downward through an invisible break in the trees, nearly tossing me headfirst out the open side. The guy at the wheel shouted over his shoulder.

“You good?” Slight accent.

“Dandy,” I managed.

My driver was an art cowboy named Emmett Kahn, his term not mine. He’d greeted me an hour earlier with a smile and a bone-crushing handshake.

I guessed Kahn’s age at somewhere north of sixty. Shaggy black hair, olive skin, lidded dark eyes, muttonchops the size of prime ribs. A successful art dealer, Kahn owned the three hundred acre tract through which we were taking Mr. Toad’s wild ride.

“I call the place Carolitaly because the property’s shaped like a boot. We’re heading to The Toe. The last conveyed in capital letters. “Know much about Mountain Island Lake?”

I shook my head, jaw clamped. By the time we rattled to our goal, I’d need fillings replaced.

“The lake was created in 1929 to support the hydroelectric and steam stations. It’s fed by the Catawba River and is the smallest of the three man-mades in Mecklenburg County.”

“Big.” All I could muster was caveman speak. Land large. Drive bumpy. Tempe rattled.

“That’s why I have a caretaker. Skip handles security.” Kahn tipped his head toward the block of cement riding shotgun. More Thud than Skip, the man was square in every sense of the word. Square shoulders, square back, brush cut that squared the top of his head. Aviator shades hid Skip’s eyes, but I hadn’t a doubt he was scowling.

“Skip’s a cop with Gaston County. Helps to have local grease, you know?”

The Mule leveled, allowing a clear sight line to the eastern horizon. Clouds hung low, dark and bloated with rain.

Smoother ground allowed me to yell, “I thought this was Mecklenburg.”

“County line runs through the middle of the lake. My property spans both sides. My man Skip knew Mecklenburg had a bone lady and suggested I call down there.”

Clever Skip. The CMPD had rolled it to the MCME. My boss had rolled it to me.

“Actually, I work for the medical examiner.”

“You’re a coroner?”

“Forensic anthropologist. I examine bodies too far gone for normal autopsy.”

“Like floaters.” Kahn’s use of the term suggested way too much television.

“Yes. And the skeletal, mummified, decomposed, dismembered, burned, and mutilated.”

“I’ve seen that on TV. You figure out how old the vic is. Man or woman, black or white. How the died, right?”

“Yes.”

“You can do that with just four bones?”

“Fragments are tough,” I shouted. “It’s good you found more.”

Something winged from a back tire and ricocheted off a boulder.

“We getting close?”

Kahn either ignored or didn’t hear my question.

“So the more bones, the easier to catch a murderer.”

“If it’s murder.”

I had my doubts. Mr. Tibia Fibula’s cortical surfaces were smooth and bleached. Too smooth and bleached. I suspected they’d been around for decades. My money was on a washed-out grave. North Carolina has relaxed laws on private burial. In the Appalachians, it wasn’t uncommon for Grandpa to end up in the backyard with Rover.

“Were all the bones found at the same location?” I bellowed over the roar of the engine.

“The first four washed up on Arch Beach. Want to detour over there?”

“Another time.” An ominous rumbling juddered from the clouds. “And today’s find?”

“At The Toe, facing the Meck side.”

“The opposite shore of the peninsula,” I clarified.

~~“When the river flooded last week the lake rose fifteen feet. The whole point was underwater, so the bag could have come from either side. Skip was checking out the damage when he saw it snagged on a tree. One whiff and he called me.”~~

Bag? Whiff? Apprehension rippled a neural pathway.

“I thought you found bones.”

Kahn beamed over his shoulder. “You insisted we call if we found anything else, so we did. We didn’t touch a thing, so the scene’s not compromised.” Definitely too much crime TV.

Irritation battled uneasiness. Was this a goose chase? A colossal waste of my Saturday?

With a twist of the wheel, Kahn jerked the Mule ninety degrees, bounced down a hill, and stopped just short of the water. When the motor died, the silence was deafening. “Here we are.”

I jumped out and surveyed my surroundings.

We were on a finger of land showing signs of recent submersion. Rippled soil. Scattered pebbles and shells. Mud-coated vegetation.

I looked a question at Skip. He gestured toward lake.

Branches snagged my hair as I picked my way toward the water. Kahn and Mr. Loquacious waited on the upslope.

A dead fish lay on the muddy shoreline, guts ballooning like mushrooms from its belly. Surprisingly, few flies were availing themselves of the free lunch. Feeding elsewhere? Spooked by the coming storm?

I scanned the length of a pine tree lying half out of the water. Saw an oversized blue canvas bag ten feet out, its surface crawling with flies.

I turned to question my chatty companion. “You didn’t touch the bag?”

“Nope.” Skip could speak. “Smell was enough.”

“How long since you found it?”

“Two, three hours?”

I pulled on gloves, the neural pathways now pinging fortissimo. Smell? Flies on old bones?

Thankful I’d worn rain boots, I waded into the lake. The men watched without comment.

Footing was awkward. The mucky bottom sucked with every step I took. The water rose, eventually topping the rims and spilling into the boots, soaking my socks and chilling my feet.

At midhigh depth, I reached the bag and a waft of odor.

Hopes of viewing watercolors with Anne vanished instantly.

The flies. The odor. Something didn’t track.

I stared at the bag, debating. Call for help? Drag it ashore then phone the lab?

Clouds pulsed with electricity on the far side of the lake. The rumbling sounded louder.

Screw protocol. No way I wanted lightning frying my ass.

After shooting pics with my iPhone, I leaned toward the bag and tugged. My balance wasn’t good enough to free the thing.

I stepped closer. *Calliphoridae* bouncing off my face and hair, I yanked the handles from the branches on which they were snagged. The bag dropped with a smack.

Moving as quickly as my water-filled footwear allowed, I lugged my prize toward shore. Irritated flies trailed in my wake.

Skip helped drag the bag across the mud and up onto the rise. Water oozed from the canvas and poured from a six-inch tear on one side.

Back on terra firma, I took several more shots. Then I pulled the zipper and peeled back the top flap. Disenchanted, the flies set off for the fish. Sushi al fresco.

A skull stared out, orbits round and empty, as though startled by the sudden intrusion of sunlight.

Hair covered the cranium and trailed the face like long, dark seaweed.

~~The body was clothed. Beneath the sodden fabric I could see remnants of ligament, a tag of gray green tissue here and there.~~

That wasn't what froze my breath in my throat.

The legs were tightly flexed, the bones slender tubes running below the muck-covered denim.

Legs.

Plural.

No way this was Mr. Tibia Fibula.

SKIP HELPED LOAD THE bag onto the Mule. The jarring ride might cause damage, but I didn't want to wait. Lightning was streaking in earnest now.

Our return was subdued, even Kahn silent. At the compound, I picked up sufficient signal to make a call.

Tim Larabee, head pathologist at the MCME, was as surprised as I was. He'd sent me out full expecting old bones.

Larabee asked if I could toss the bag into my trunk. Hell, no. I'd done that before. Once. The smell lingered in my car as long as I owned it. Maybe in my mind. Either way, I wasn't going there again.

Larabee promised a transport van.

We waited amid cabins more suited to the Alps than the Carolina foothills. Kahn explained that they contained studios for the use of visiting artists, but I saw no signs of another's presence. Skip said nothing.

After twenty minutes, Kahn excused himself to handle some business. I wondered if he planned to head-up his lawyer. Skip stayed with me. Silent as ever.

"Mountain Island Lake sounds like they couldn't make up their minds." My stab at small talk.

"Mountain's that island in the middle." Chin-cocking the water.

"Must be deep."

"Six hundred and fifty feet. Lake's 3,300 acres, 61 miles of shore." Two sentences. Skip was on roll.

"That's a lot of lake," I said.

"People in Charlotte drink a lotta water."

"Word of today leaks out they may to switch to bottled."

Skip didn't appreciate my humor. "We haul in five or six bodies a year. Mostly drunk boaters. Some we never find."

Maybe *I'd* switch to Evian.

Kahn rejoined us, so I directed my questions to him.

"How many people have access to this area?"

"Only my family, my guests, and Skip. At the moment we have two artists in residence. We change the gate code when we think of it, but the place is large and, frankly, porous."

"Fenced?"

Kahn waggled a hand. Yes and no. "We share a boundary fence with the Duke Energy folks. But it's old and pretty much ignored, except by me."

"The Riverbend Steam Station?" I'd seen it driving in, a hulking set of smokestacks, brick boxes, conveyers, and tangled wiring that looked like something out of a post-apocalypse film.

"Yeah. It's a coal-fired power plant built in '29 when the lake was created. Riverbend was brought

online to supplement the supply when demands for electricity were highest. The place is so decrepit and poorly maintained the locals are rabid. And the situation has gotten worse since Duke shut h down a few months back. Environmental groups are screaming that coal ash is leaking from the lagoons into the lake, suing for cleanup. We'll see how that goes."

"So anyone could access the peninsula? The Toe?" My gut told me the bag was a water dump, but I wanted my bases covered.

Kahn shrugged one shoulder. "Sure. Just blow off the NO TRESPASSING signs. This area used to be Hells Angels turf, so we still get bikers hot-rodding the trails, buzzing us in boats, that kind of thing."

"Any indications of recent entry?"

Kahn turned to Skip. "You good here?"

Skip nodded.

"Please phone when the van arrives." To me. "Let me show you something."

Before I could respond, Kahn circled a cabin and set off down a path barely visible in the underbrush. I followed.

"At Carolitaly we try to integrate art with nature." Kahn spoke as we walked. "Throughout the compound are living installations. Beauty in unanticipated places."

"Ah." I was clueless.

Five yards into the woods, Kahn stopped and arced an arm skyward. "Beauty in the trees."

A Plexiglas and metal capsule sat affixed to the branches of an oak ten feet above our heads.

"Let me guess. A space ship?"

"A vessel for the contemplation of space. A person seeking tranquility can sit inside and meditate. Glass allows light to enter, but enclosure prevents distraction, allowing one to direct one's thoughts inward."

"Ah." Modern art, not my thing.

Kahn continued toward a pine-needle-covered mound outfitted with a refrigerator door and a porthole. Wordlessly, he tugged open the door and directed me to look inside.

A buried pod held a round table surrounded by a curved bench. The walls, floor, ceiling, and furnishings were plastic, a warmthless, hospital white.

"Up to three people can survive underground for days."

Not this chick, I thought.

"There are thirteen of these on the property. Thirteen is the number for rebellion, apostasy, defection, disintegration, revolution."

A survivalist's wet dream.

"For a while now I've been seeing signs of a squatter at some of the pods."

"Any idea who?"

"Ever heard of monkey-wrenching?"

"Eco-terrorism."

Kahn nodded. Ran a hand over his jaw.

"The fellow you want to talk to is that wing nut, Herman Blount. Back in August, Blount posted some videos online threatening to blow up the Riverbend station. Then he went off the grid."

"You think Blount's gone to ground on your property?"

Kahn nodded glumly.

"If anyone's capable of violence, it would be Blount."

WHEN I ENTERED THE Mecklenburg County Medical Examiner facility early Monday morning, Mrs. Flowers, the receptionist, was at her post. As usual, her outfit was floral, her hair a perfectly perm and sprayed peach helmet.

I waved, crossed the reception area, and carded my way into the biovestibule leading to the autopsy suites and staff offices. "Biovestibule" is what you call a three-hundred-million-dollar hallway. Hell, damn.

Our recently built, state-of-the-art, Leed-certified MCME facility still has that new-car smell. After decades in the old, refurbished Sears-Garden-Center-make-do quarters, everyone on staff is loving the new digs.

I headed to autopsy room four, one of a pair specially ventilated for aromatics: decomps, floaters, putrefied corpses. My stinkers.

As I detoured to my office to lock my purse in a drawer, Larabee appeared. In his off time, the chief enjoys long-distance running. A lot of it. The hours on the pavement have turned him into a lean and leathery Ichabod Crane in surgical scrubs.

"How'd it go at Mountain Island Lake?"

"Beat the storm." I straightened to face him.

"Joe said it rained like hell on the drive back. Wind almost knocked the van off the road."

Joe Hawkins has been a death investigator with the MCME since before Moses discovered clay.

"I didn't see Joe's name on the sign-in board. Where is he?"

"Out with pink eye. Do you mind working alone?"

"I mind it less than pink eye. Where are my bones?"

"In the cooler. Joe did prelim photos and X rays, then left everything on the gurney."

"Busy weekend?"

"Not bad. One stabbing, an electrical death, and a murder-suicide. Nothing for you."

In our strange industry, that roster qualified as "not bad."

"Keep me looped in." With this, Larabee was gone.

Relieved I had no other cases, I snapped a form onto my clipboard, went to the locker room to change, then headed to the cooler. I hoped forty-eight hours of chilling had diminished the smell. I knew that wouldn't be so. At least not for long.

After wheeling the gurney to room four, I gloved and strapped goggles onto my head. Then I slapped a mask on my face, and finished with a plastic apron tied behind my neck and waist. Fetching

Ceiling-mounted surgical light on. Industrial-strength fan blades whirring. I was ready.

Joe had done a good job articulating the bones while still leaving them inside the clothes. After years assisting me tableside, he knows what I want.

The skeleton lay supine, with limbs slightly splayed. *Savasana* posture. Weird, but that phrase

popped into my mind. Corpse pose.

~~The hair mass had sloughed from the skull during transport or handling. It lay to one side, filled with rotting vegetation and other lacustrine debris.~~

I flipped on the light box. Joe's full-body X rays revealed nothing extraordinary.

Back at the gurney, I paused, studying what remained of a person. Water is not kind to the dead. The bloat is grotesque, the smell nauseating. That phase had largely passed, leaving only bone and shreds of putrid flesh.

Yet this had been a human being. I felt the usual stab of sorrow. Hair always does that to me. Evokes the simple act of brushing, ear-tucking, tossing in a breeze.

Somehow my brain was channeled on yoga. It now fired an image, a class I'd recently attended. "Set your intention," the instructor had said. "There is power in your thoughts."

My gaze roved the body. I set my intention. A name. A final trip home.

Time noted on the form: 8:38 a.m.

I lowered the goggles, raised the mask, and began.

First I ran a magnifying lens over the clothing. Spotted a few short hairs, likely animal. Plucked and placed them in a plastic vial.

Next, using scissors, I cut up the center of the thin olive T-shirt proclaiming HAPPILY EVER RAPTOR and spread the two halves to either side of the torso. The jeans took more effort, but eventually they too, lay halved and peeled back on the stainless steel. When finished with the bones, I'd remove and examine the clothing more closely.

A skeletal inventory revealed every element present. Surprising, given the breach in the bag.

A nonprominent nuchal crest, smooth brow ridges, and small mastoids suggested female gender. Pelvic traits were in agreement with those on the skull.

The cranium was relatively long and thin. The nasal bridge was low, the opening wide. I ran measurements through a software program called Fordisc 3.0. Every indicator pointed to African American ancestry.

Determination of age requires more minute examination. At birth, the skeleton is only partially complete. Throughout childhood and adolescence extra bits appear and attach to the ends and edges of bones. Components of the vertebrae and pelvis fuse.

The clavicle is the last to complete the process. I examined both, where they met the breastbone. Each had a cap firmly affixed to its tip, but a faint squiggly line told me fusion had occurred shortly before death.

I checked the arm and leg bones. The pelvis where the two halves met in front. The ribs where they attached via cartilage to the sternum.

To confirm my skeletal estimate, I pulled the postmortem dental X rays from their tiny envelopes and popped them on a light box.

Minimal wear on all occlusal surfaces. Root formation complete throughout the arcade.

Every age indicator told the same story. Young adult.

A femoral measurement placed the woman's height at solidly average. Small muscle attachments suggested she'd been of slight to medium build.

I reviewed the data I'd entered onto the case form.

Female. Black. Twenty-three to twenty-seven years of age. Between 5'5" and 5'8".

I found the missing person file the cops had sent over with the first four bones.

Edith Blankenship fit the profile in every parameter.

I unclipped the photo and studied the subject.

A girl smiled from under a tasseled mortarboard, curly black hair framing her face. She wasn't pretty, wasn't homely either. Just plain. But the set jaw and straight-at-the-camera gaze conveyed

confidence and determination.

~~The media had flashed the same image for a week or so. Until fresher crimes drew the attention~~
law enforcement. Until news coverage shifted to flooding in the Midwest. Then Edith Blankenship
dwindled to tattered flyers posted on telephone poles in northwest Charlotte.

Edith's case was briefly reinvigorated by the Mountain Island Lake bones. Those investigating her
disappearance were certain the file would shift to homicide or move to the "closed" category in some
other way. I'd dashed their hopes.

Had Edith finally turned up?

My mind shifted to PMI. Postmortem interval.

I checked a date. Edith Blankenship was last seen alive on September 8.

Fall had been unseasonably warm, even for North Carolina. The torn bag had allowed access to fish
turtles, and other aquatic scavengers. They, along with the normal spectrum of bacteria, had done the
job.

My first impression, the level of decomp looked good for an early September immersion. But I
need to verify.

I straightened, arched backward, then rolled my shoulders. I was again thinking yoga when my
stomach growled.

The wall clock said 1:03 p.m. I was starving.

I removed my mask and tossed my goggles to the counter. Stripped my gloves and apron, balled
them, and tried a layup into a biohazard can. Two points.

Quick hand wash, then I returned to my office. I was fantasizing about a giant sub when the de
phone rang.

I considered letting the call roll to voicemail.

Picked up.

Big mistake.



“THANKS FOR SENDING A floater into my basket.”

Charlotte Mecklenburg PD Homicide investigator Erskine “Skinny” Slidell had not been pleased by my call on Saturday. I’d fled behind the transport van, leaving him debating jurisdiction with Officer Skip. Junkyard dog vs. Jersey barrier.

“You’re welcome.”

“You tossed in the Unabomber for shits and giggles?”

“Have you found Herman Blount?”

“Oh, yeah. Prick looked like Saddam friggin’ Hussein peering outta his spider hole. I’ll let him sweat a while, think about the good times out hugging trees. Then I’ll grill him.”

“I’d like to be there.”

“How come that don’t surprise me?”

The Law Enforcement Center is on East Trade Street, in uptown Charlotte. The drive took ten minutes.

Skinny met me on the second floor, beside a door marked Violent Crimes Division. Behind it were Homicide and ADW, assault with a deadly. Blount was in the farthest of three interview rooms on the opposite side of the hall.

“Mr. Birkenstocks and lentils has spent the past six weeks underground. Smells like shit.”

Coming from Skinny, this was a statement.

“What’s his story?”

“Guy’s got a beef with coal power. And hydroelectric. And logging, mining, farming, ranching, pesticides, the fur trade, animal testing, zoos, circuses, rodeos, McDonald’s . . .”

“You’ve already questioned him?”

“Asshole hasn’t shut up since I hauled his sorry butt outta his hidey-hole. Keeps grinding on about coal ash and arsenic and fish having trouble porking.”

“Do you think Blount’s a serious threat?”

“Your artist buddy was right about the videos.” Slidell shook his head in disgust. “The dude with the squirrels growing on his face—”

I rotated a hand, indicating he should skip the comments on Kahn.

“Blount posted a bunch of boom-boom DIYs on YouTube. Going for an Oscar in dumbfuckery.”

“Does he have a record?” I made a mental note to check out Herman Blount’s stylings on sabotage.

“String of minors. Criminal trespassing. Vandalism. Destruction of property. Got busted for spiking trees about eight years back, did a bump with the feds. Caused \$400,000 in damage to logging equipment. Dumb moob left prints all over the spikes.”

“Any crimes against persons?”

“Iredell County cops like him for two nonlethal pipe bombs. One at a chinchilla ranch, another at

joint that offs dogs so surgeons can learn how to cut. The guy's slippery as goat snot. Nothing sticking so far."

"This is only a prelim, but the bones in the bag look good for Edith Blankenship."

"Yeah?"

"Black female, early to mid-twenties. I'll need dentals for a positive."

"Any signs of trauma?"

"No. But I'm guessing she didn't zip herself in to go for a dip."

"You're thinking body drop?"

I nodded.

"Still don't mean murder. She could have OD'ed, or had some other kinda accident, her pa panicked and off-loaded the body."

"Maybe."

"Why'd she surface?"

"As a corpse decomposes the body cavity fills with methane gas produced by bacteria in the gut. The bloating, helped by flooding, likely floated the bag."

"You're always so full of sunshine, doc."

"An experienced killer would puncture the gut and intestines, then weight the container so it stays down. Blankenship was amateur hour."

Skinny opened his mouth to comment. I didn't let him.

"Find anything linking Blount to Blankenship?"

"They're into the same save-the-Earth shit." Slidell pulled a small spiral from his jacket, spinned it, thumbed a few pages, and read. "Blankenship's enrolled in the environmental sciences master's program at UNCC. Before that she worked for Impact Watch, a nonprofit that studies the effects of climate development on wildlife in western North Carolina. Their HQ is in Mount Holly."

"Right up the road from Mountain Island Lake."

I raised my brows. Skinny raised his.

"Who reported her missing?"

"Grandmother." Slidell's eyes dropped to his notes. "Ada Wilkins. Blankenship lived with her. Went to school one day, never came home."

"Who caught the case?"

"Hoogie Smith. He says Blankenship was a loner. Didn't work, no boyfriend, no besties. Father was never in the picture, mother was dead. He followed up what leads he had. Interviewed a few profs, Ada Wilkins, some of her neighbors. Wilkins admitted her granddaughter had taken off once before, after the mom died. The kid had no credit cards, nothing like that. Everyone figured she got fed up and legged it out of town."

"Cell phone?"

"Traced to a tower near UNCC the morning she went missing. Then the thing stopped working."

I knew what happened when the leads fizzled out. Blankenship's folder went into a stack with other MP files. Was buried deeper and deeper as the pile grew higher.

Slidell jerked the spitty thumb at interview room three.

"I don't want to spook this toad. You watch from two."

I did as directed. Sat at the table with my arms crossed.

In seconds a small monitor kicked to life and tinny sound began sputtering through a wall-mounted speaker.

Blount looked up as Slidell crossed the room. He wasn't what I expected. Surfer-dude blond hair, chiseled features, electric blue eyes. Save for the ratty beard, he looked more Christian quarterback than eco-saboteur.

And Blount had obviously seen some gym time. Broad shoulders. Upper arms the size of utility poles. Washboard abs beneath a long-sleeved T.

Slidell took a seat. Placed a folder on the table. One by one withdrew pages. Positioned them neatly. Slowly read. Or pretended to. I knew the routine. Put the interviewee off balance by making him wait.

“I’ve done nothing. You can’t hold me.”

Slidell continued as though Blount hadn’t spoken. After several unhurried moments, he finally placed his fingers and dropped his hands to the roll lapping over his belt.

“Here’s what I’m asking myself, Herman. You good with that? Me calling you Herman?”

Blount only glared.

“Why does a guy with nothing to hide go underground?”

“Every day we’re surrounded by cancer-causing high-voltage power lines. I go to earth periodically to give my cells a break from the constant bombardment of electromagnetic radiation.”

“Mm.” Slidell nodded, as though thinking about that.

“And it’s peaceful.”

“That why you sabotage utility companies? ’Cause they’re frying your balls?”

“I don’t sabotage anyone. But if I did, it would be a justifiable act of self-defense. The Riverber Steam Station is poisoning people by dumping coal ash into the water supply. It should be stopped.”

Stoked either by zealot fervor and/or lunatic fury, Blount’s eyes blazed like two gas flames. Mesmerizing. I wondered if Edith had been caught in his spell.

“Ever think of suing?” Slidell, the voice of reason.

“The courts are useless. The government’s complicit. Pollutants keep people weak and submissive.”

“Explosives are much more direct.” Skinny leaned forward to consult the file. “Like at Destin Chinchilla Ranch and Arnett Labs.”

“You have the wrong guy. I was never charged.”

“You did a stretch for spiking a tree.”

“A foolish youthful impulse. I know better now.”

“So these outfits you target online. They magically blow themselves up?”

“Obviously I’m not alone in my views.”

Blount held Slidell’s eyes, confident, composed. But a blanching of his lips suggested pent-up emotion. Anxiety? Rage?

“Cop lost a thumb defusing the Arnett bomb.”

“Small sacrifice compared to the animals they tortured.”

“What about Edith Blankenship? She a small sacrifice, too?”

The quick segue was meant to catch Blount off guard. I watched his face closely. No reaction.

“Who?”

“Grad student at UNCC.”

Blount shrugged one well-muscled shoulder.

“Maybe you two hooked up at Impact Watch. She Xerox your manifesto for you? You can write. You can’t you, Herman?”

Blount didn’t rise to the bait. “Impact Watch is made up of lackeys. The government pats them on their heads, pretends to listen. The problems continue, nothing is solved.”

“That what happened? Edith become a problem you had to solve?”

“You’ve found her?”

“Who said she was missing?”

“I read the papers.”

“Where were you September 8?”

“I refuse to live by the structure of a calendar.”

“Let me jog your memory, Herman.” Skinny leaned in until his face was inches from Blount’s. “~~C~~
September 8 you uploaded your thoughts on how to demolish the Riverbend Steam Station.”

Blount drew back to give himself distance. “I had a court appearance in Buncombe County. I was
hours away. Check it out.”

“You can take that to the bank. Who helped you make the video?”

“A tripod.”

Slidell took another sharp turn.

“You and Blankenship pour valve-grinding compound into engines together? A little hit and run at
Belvedere Logging last May?”

Blount shook his head in feigned disappointment. “You guys just don’t get it. We’re an army.
We’re fighting back. You can’t wish us away. You can’t bully us away.” Now it was Blount who thrust
his face forward. His next words were barely above a whisper. “We’re everywhere.”

Slidell didn’t blink. I was surprised. By now he’d typically be going all bad cop.

“Was Blankenship one of your henchmen?”

“Edith Blankenship and her sort lack the guts to ‘hench.’” Air quotes. “Protests and petitions will
never stop the destruction. Action is needed.”

“So Edith disagreed with your radical politics. Threatened to turn you in. So you capped her.”

“Turn me in for what? Being able to handle a knife? To stalk prey without making a sound? To kill
what I eat? Survival skills, detective.” Blount sat back and arm-draped his chair. “Just stayin’ alive.”

Slidell clicked his tongue and pointed a finger. “College boy, right? Ivy League?”

“Dartmouth. So?”

“Pipe bombs 101. That on their fancy-pants curriculum? That what they taught you? To blow shit
up?”

Again, the disappointed head wag.

“I learned that distrust of the government and belief in free speech aren’t crimes. I learned that
humans face extinction because we’re consuming the earth. That nature must be protected at any
cost.”

“Swanky talk for a guy we yanked out of a hole.”

“I’m not responsible for the crimes of others, even if I applaud them.” Blount’s neon stare now
seemed cold as ice. “You have nothing linking me to this Blankenship woman. We both know that
I’d be under arrest.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. But know this, you pompous little sack of shit.” Slidell’s voice was now
hard as granite. “I’ll find that link. And until I do, you can forget about death rays and tinfoil hats. I’m
your worst nightmare.”

Slidell gathered his papers and strode from the room.

“WHAT’S YOUR TAKE?” I asked as Slidell lumbered up the hall.

“Guy’s a nut job, but I can’t arrest him for being crazy.”

“Do you think he’s lying?”

“Course he’s lying. Everyone lies. About what? You tell me. I gotta kick him.”

“Can you hold him on a trespassing charge?”

Slidell gave me his long-suffering, pouchy-eyed look.

“He’ll go to ground again. You’ll lose him.”

“I won’t lose him.”

I knew Slidell couldn’t detain Blount without grounds. And that he’d put a tail on him. Still, it was frustrating.

“I get a bad vibe from this guy.”

“He’s a loon, but he’s not dumb. He knows I’ll check with Buncombe County. The alibi’s gonna hold.”

“September 8 is the day Edith Blankenship went missing. We don’t know when she died.”

There was a long silence. Then Slidell said, “I need more. Get me cause and time of death.”

“I’m on it.”

Back at the MCME, I inhaled a tuna sandwich, knocked back a Diet Coke, then re-costumed and returned to autopsy room four. The bones lay as I’d left them.

Rule of thumb. One week aboveground equals two submerged. But a whole lot of variables come into play.

I contacted the National Weather Service. My recollection was correct. The North Carolina Piedmont had experienced a very warm fall.

I called Duke Energy. Discharge from the Riverbend Steam Station raised temperatures at Mountain Island Lake to levels higher than normal. The water was reasonably oxygen-saturated. Aquatic life was abundant.

I reviewed what I knew about underwater decomp. The fat layers in skin expand, deforming the corpse within twenty-four hours. One week out, the flesh and connective tissue loosen and parts begin to fall off.

Packaging slows the process. But the bag that held Edith was badly torn.

Given conditions, and the state of the body, I estimated PMI at roughly four weeks.

Consistent with LSA for Edith Blankenship.

I entered the information onto my form, then moved on to cause of death.

Again, I started with the skull. No bullet entrances or exits. No radiating, depressed, or linear fractures. No cuts, nicks, or slashes.

The hyoid is a small u-shaped bone that hangs between the mandible and the larynx in the so

tissue of the throat. I examined Edith's for damage indicative of manual strangulation. Saw zip.

~~No surprise. In younger individuals, bone elasticity allows the hyoid to undergo compression without breaking.~~

I went to the scope and adjusted focus. Peered through the eyepiece.

Nothing on the right side of the bone. I shifted to the left.

And there it was. A minute fissure jagging the edge of the body where it met the wing.

I straightened, heart beating a little faster.

Edith Blankenship had been strangled.

I pictured the woman's last moments, body bucking, hands clawing, so desperate for air her nails gouged her own flesh.

Christ.

Shoving my anger to another place, I continued. Ribs. Long bones.

At the pelvis, I got my next shock.

Adhered to the belly side of the right innominate was a small gray mass. Using one finger, I teased it free.

As I probed, the outer casing split, revealing a jumble of delicate bones. A single tooth.

Heat fizzed in my chest. Had Edith been pregnant?

But no. The shapes were off. The half mandible was too oblong, the clavicle too sharply s-curved. Though tiny, the tooth looked fully formed.

I carried my find to the scope. Tweezed out bone after bone.

Was it a tumor? A teratoma gone mad?

Teratomas are tumors that can contain tissues or structures from any of the three cell types in which an embryo differentiates. Hair, teeth, bones. Rarely, a whole organ such as an eye or a hand.

Then realization.

What the hell?

Baffled, I collected the whole assemblage and laid it on a tray. Then I returned to the gurney.

The left innominate produced a second blob similar to the first.

I straightened, running scenarios through my mind.

I'd examined the victims of sexual sadists. Knew the depravity of which humans are capable. Had Edith been tortured? Had some sick bastard forced this obscenity inside her? What was the slang term? Gerbiling?

An idea tugged the sleeve of my consciousness. *Psst.*

What?

My eyes roved the sink, the cabinets, the stainless steel around me. Returned to the gurney.

I looked at the skeleton. At the sodden attire bisected and splayed beneath it.

Frustrated, I rubbed circles on my temples.

Psst.

Edith's clothes? Lifting one tattered side of the T, I laid the fabric back across the ribs. Read the faded words.

Of course.

I lifted the leg and pelvic bones, scooped the jeans free, and cut away the back pockets. More gray masses. I opened and emptied each.

"Bingo."

I yanked off a glove and dialed Slidell. He actually picked up.

"I've got something.

"What?"

"Get over here. Now."

I disconnected.

~~I could have explained by phone. Skinny at the morgue would be much more amusing.~~

THE DOOR OPENED. SLIDELL strode in and tossed an envelope onto the counter. A hint of BO competed with *l'eau de floater*.

“Lemme tell you. This guy Chou is a real wanker.”

I pitied the hapless dentist, Dr. Chou. His morning had not been a good one.

Without comment, I popped Edith’s dental X rays onto the light box beside the postmortem shot Joe had taken. On one of the little black squares in each set, two snowy white caps sat atop molar Restorations. I compared their positioning, their shapes. The root configurations.

“We’ll need confirmation by an odontologist, but I’ll bet the farm it’s a match.”

Slidell nodded, already all sweat and heartbeat. Decades on the murder desk, yet an autopsy room still set him on edge.

“Whatcha got that’s so important?”

I showed him my Lilliputian osteology collection.

Slidell studied the bones, then his eyes rolled up.

“Rats,” I said.

Grunting a comment I couldn’t hear, he refocused on the tray.

“And voles, maybe a few mice.” I indicated the gray masses, now disemboweled. “The bones can’t come from these.”

“And they are?”

“Owl pellets.”

“What the hell?”

“Not what, whoooo. Come with me.”

I led him to my office and logged onto a website using my laptop.

“Carolina Raptor Center?” Slidell sounded light years beyond dubious. “Like eagles and hawks?”

I nodded. “Raptors are amazing carnivores. They consume the whole animal—bones, organs, flesh. Kind of like you at a barbecue.”

“You’re a laugh riot, doc.”

“Thanks. Owls are different from other raptors. They can’t digest fur, teeth, bones, claws, and feathers.”

“You got a point?”

“As indigestible materials pass through the digestive tract, the gizzard compacts them into a pellet that the owl regurgitates.”

“You’re showing me bird barf.”

“I found two owl pellets in Edith Blankenship’s pelvic cavity, below where her front jeans pocket would have been.”

Slidell said nothing.

“She had four more pellets in a back pocket. I suspect she was researching owls.”

“And hit this raptor center.”

I nodded.

“You know where the place is?”

“Mountain Island Lake.”

“Oh-nine-hundred tomorrow. I’ll pick you up at your crib.”

. . .

Slidell was twenty minutes early. I left my unfinished Cheerios and took my coffee in a travel mug.

Full-body latex is as appropriate for Skinny’s car as it is for autopsy room four. Fast-food carton Cigarette butts. Remnants of old bagged lunches. I perched gingerly, minimizing contact with the seat and floor.

We drove north out of town on Route 16. Soon the high-rise condo and office buildings gave way to suburban homes and strip malls, then to fields and the occasional muffler shop, church, or barbecue joint.

Forty-five minutes out, Slidell turned from the highway onto a narrow two-lane. Nothing but shoreline, woods, and pasture. Here and there a startled equine, a boat access ramp.

Soon we saw an arrow pointing to our destination. Slidell hooked left into a gravel parking area and cut the engine. A sign warned PROTECTED BY ALARMS, CAMERAS, AND SHARP TALONS.

The Carolina Raptor Center was bright and airy, festive with photos and avian carvings. Eagle replicas hung from the ceiling. Baskets overflowed with tourist goodies—stuffed peregrines, owl keychains, T-shirts proclaiming BIRD NERD and GIVE A HOOT. On one wall a verdant mural depicted the life cycle of the red-tailed hawk.

“Hello!” chirped a septuagenarian with an astonishingly hot pink smile. “I’m Doris. May I help you?”

Doris looked like a character straight from *The Far Side*. Cat-eye glasses, bouffant gray hair, cable-knit cardigan with more pills than a Walgreens. Small but stocky. Fit.

Slidell flashed his badge.

“Oh my!” The woman pressed a liver-spotted hand to her heart, eyes darting left and right as if fearful of a SWAT team hit. “Is there a problem?”

“That would be Doris . . . ?” Slidell dipped his chin in question.

“Kramer. Doris Kramer.”

Slidell pulled a photo from an inside jacket pocket. “Do you recognize this woman?”

“Of course. That’s Edith.” Doris frowned. “Such a puzzle. I’d never have believed she’d just leave us like that.”

“She was a frequent visitor here?” I asked.

“Many of Professor Olsen’s students do projects at the center. He brings a group every Tuesday afternoon. Edith loved our birds so much she stayed on as a hospital volunteer.”

“Hospital?”

“More than seven hundred injured and orphaned raptors come to our facility every year. We’re one of the few centers in the southeast that rehabilitates the American bald eagle.” If people really care, Doris was doing it. Then her face collapsed. “It’s horrible that so many of these majestic creatures are hit by cars and electrocuted by power lines.”

“Power lines?” I said

“Electrocuted?” Slidell said.

Doris nodded solemnly. “Because their wing span is so broad they can touch two lines at once. It nearly broke Edith’s heart. She’d sit hours in the ER with injured birds. She was on our ambulance team, too, responded to calls about feathered friends in trouble. But mostly she tended our residents.”

“Residents?” Slidell’s tone suggested fast-dwindling patience.

~~“We house over a hundred raptors that can’t be released due to injury, amputation, or human imprinting. Visitors can observe twenty-three different species by walking our raptor trail.”~~

“What did Edith do?” I asked.

“She cleaned cages, filled feeders, performed routine health checks.” Doris laughed, a sound halfway between a hiccup and a cough. “I swear that girl liked birds more than people. Especially owls. They were her favorite.” Doris’s smile crumpled again. “I mean *are*.” She shook her head. “O dear. It’s just so troubling.”

A couple entered carrying a beagle puppy. Doris jumped as though tasered.

“Excuse me! Absolutely no dogs allowed!” Moving faster than I thought someone her age could move, she hustled the offenders back out the door.

I nudged Slidell. Pointed to a bulletin board beside a nest big enough to accommodate pterodactyls. A thumb-tacked flier proclaimed “Fight Back At Duke Energy—Learn To Live Off The Grid.” The contact listed was hermanblount2@gmail.com.

Doris returned to her counter, vivid lips smashed up into a scowl. “Really. There are signs everywhere. Don’t people understand that dogs are dreadful for birds?” She rotated her upper arm to display a bruise, an eggplant arch curving the pallid flesh. “A dog bit me last week. Truth be told, don’t trust the creatures.”

“Did Edith know a man named Herman Blount?” I tried to steer the interview back on track.

“Yes.” Wary.

“Not a fan?”

“I can’t fault Herman’s love of animals. Though it’s poor judgment to own a Rottweiler, any bird is a worst nightmare. But he’s a bit . . . extreme for my taste.” Doris’s eyes went wide. “Has Herman done something wrong?”

Slidell ignored her question. “How well did Blount know Blankenship?”

“He once brought in an injured barred. That’s an owl. Edith helped nurse it. Poor thing didn’t survive. Edith and Herman were both passionate about forcing power companies to make their lines safer for birds. And, well, if you’ve met him, you know. Herman isn’t hard on the eyes.” Doris flicked her brows in a “get my drift?” message that was quite unsettling.

“Did they spend time together?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” Shrug. “I mind my own.”

Skinny went straight for the kill. “Is Blankenship capable of violence?”

“Like what?”

“Like screwing with power lines? Blowing stuff up?”

Doris looked away.

“What?” Slidell pressed.

“I don’t want to speak ill. But that girl might do anything to protect her birds.”

“Do you have any idea what might have happened to her?” I asked gently.

Doris looked at me blankly.

“Any tiny detail could be a big help.” I smiled what I hoped was an encouraging smile.

“Judge not lest ye be judged.” Mumbled.

“If someone has hurt Edith, we need to find out in order to bring him to justice.”

Doris sighed. “No good ever comes from sleeping with a married man.”

Not what I expected.

Ditto Slidell. “Edith was hooked up?”

Doris’s hands started worrying the edge of the counter. “I’ve said too much.”

“I’m gonna need a name.” Slidell whipped out his spiral.

“Edith only mentioned him once, in the very strictest confidence. They’d fought, and she was upset. I think she realized he was never going to leave his wife.”

“A name!” Barked.

“She was seeing her professor. Dr. Jack Olsen.”

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