

THE INSPIRATION FOR THE FOX TV SERIES **BONES**
FEATURING TEMPERANCE BRENNAN

KATHY REICHS

A NOVEL

DEVIL BONES

BY THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

BONES TO ASHES

KATHY REICHS

is “a genius at building suspense” (*New York Daily News*) in her chilling #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

The bodies tell a story of young lives cut short. The bones tell a story of pure evil.

In Charlotte, North Carolina, a house under renovation becomes the site of a heated forensic investigation and an unrelenting media attention when a plumber stumbles upon a forgotten cellar. There he finds animal and human remains—including a teenage girl’s skull—cauldrons and religious artifacts, all arranged in a gruesome display. Then an adolescent boy’s torso, carved with a pentagram, is found nearby. Panic over Satanism and devil worship has gripped Charlotte’s citizens on a witch hunt led by an evangelical politician. For Tempe Brennan, nothing about the murders is clear . . . and neither is her own heart, which has her tempted yet reluctant to move on from her departed lover. But as she digs deeper into contradictory evidence from the gruesome cellar, Tempe will unearth the truth—darker and more frightening than she ever imagined.

“Reichs keeps the roller coaster on track and speeding along, page after page.” —Jeffery Deaver

“Her expertise is snappily and entertainingly delivered.” —*Booklist*

Includes a conversation with Kathy Reichs and an excerpt from *206 Bones*, her riveting new novel—available now.

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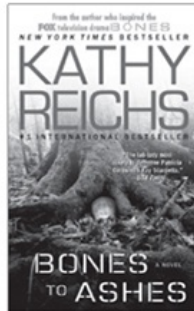
KATHY REICHS is a producer of the Fox television hit *Bones*. Like her fictional creation Temperance Brennan, she is a board-certified forensic anthropologist for the Laboratoire de Sciences Judiciaires et de Médecine Légale for the province of Quebec, a position she also held at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, State of North Carolina. Dr. Reichs is past Vice President of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and serves on the National Police Service Advisory Council in Canada. A professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, she received her Ph.D. at Northwestern University. Her debut novel, *Déjà Dead*, brought her fame when it became a *New York Times* bestseller, a #1 international bestseller, and winner of the 1997 Ellis Award for Best First Novel. Her twelfth Temperance Brennan novel, *206 Bones*, is forthcoming in hardcover from Scribner.

Her website is www.kathyreichs.com.

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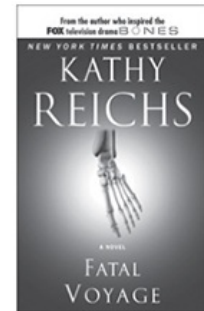
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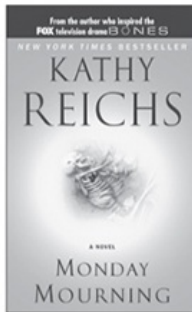
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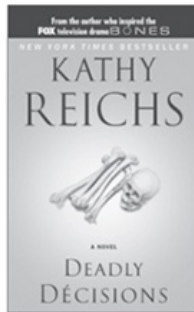
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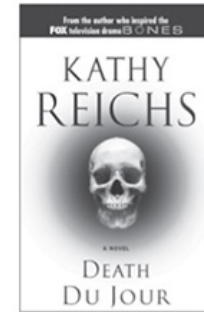
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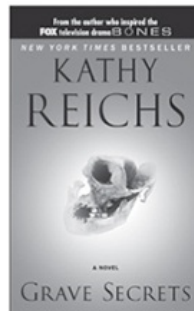
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DEVIL BONES



KATHY
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

A Conversation with Kathy Reichs

'206 Bones' Excerpt

Dedicated to

Police Officer Sean Clark
November 22, 1972–April 1, 2007

and

Police Officer Jeff Shelton
September 9, 1971–April 1, 2007

And to all who have died protecting the citizens of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina

Sergeant Anthony Scott Futrell	July 17, 2002
Police Officer John Thomas Burnette	October 5, 1993
Police Officer Anthony A. Nobles	October 5, 1993
Patrol Officer Eugene A. Griffin	November 22, 1991
Police Officer Milus Terry Lyles	August 6, 1990
Police Officer Robert Louis Smith	January 15, 1987
Patrol Officer Timothy Wayne Whittington	July 16, 1985
Patrol Officer Ernest Coleman	July 1, 1982
Patrol Officer Edmond N. Cannon	November 23, 1981
Officer Ronnie E. McGraw	October 18, 1970
Sergeant Lewis Edward Robinson, Sr.	May 4, 1970
Police Officer Johnny Reed Annas	May 21, 1960
Detective Charlie Herbert Baker	April 12, 1941
Officer Rufus L. Biggers	February 12, 1937
Officer Charles P. Nichols	April 17, 1936
Patrol Officer Benjamin H. Frye	June 9, 1930
Detective Thomas H. Jenkins	October 21, 1929
Officer William Rogers	August 30, 1929
Detective Harvey Edgar Correll	January 22, 1929
Patrol Officer Robert M. Reid	January 1, 1927
Rural Police Officer John Franklin Fesperman	February 16, 1924
Officer John Robert Estridge	March 29, 1913
Rural Police Officer Sampson E. Cole	January 1, 1905
Officer James H. Brown	August 2, 1904
Patrol Officer James Moran	April 4, 1892

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Sergeant Darrell Price, Sergeant Harold (Chuck) Henson, and Detective Christopher Dozier, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, answered cop questions. Mike Warns shared knowledge and opinions on many things. What he didn't know, he found out.

Dr. Wayne A. Walcott, Senior Associate Provost, UNC-Charlotte, provided information on the availability of scanning electron microscopes on campus. UNCC has five. Who knew?

I appreciate the continued support of Chancellor Philip L. Dubois of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

I am grateful to my family for their patience and understanding, especially when I am grumpy. C away. Special thanks must go to my daughter, Kerry, who took time to discuss my book while writing her own. (Yay! First novel: *The Best Day of Someone Else's Life*, available the spring of 2008!) Extra credit to Paul Reichs for reading and commenting on the manuscript.

Deepest thanks to my awesome agent, Jennifer Rudolph Walsh; to my brilliant editors, Nan Graham and Susan Sandon; and to my magnificent publisher, Susan Moldow. Thanks to Kevin Hanson and Amy Cormier in Canada. I also want to acknowledge all those who work so very hard on my behalf, especially Katherine Monaghan, Laretta Charlton, Anna deVries, Anna Simpson, Claudia Ballard, Jessica Almond, Tracy Fisher, and Michelle Feehan.

If there are errors in this book, they are my fault. If I have forgotten to thank someone, I apologize.

MY NAME IS TEMPERANCE DEASSE BRENNAN. I'M five-five, feisty, and forty-plus. Multidegreed. Overworked. Underpaid.

Dying.

Slashing lines through that bit of literary inspiration, I penned another opening.

I'm a forensic anthropologist. I know death. Now it stalks me. This is my story.

Merciful God. Jack Webb and *Dragnet* reincarnate.

More slashes.

I glanced at the clock. Two thirty-five.

Abandoning the incipient autobiography, I began to doodle. Circles inside circles. The clock face. The conference room. The UNCC campus. Charlotte. North Carolina. North America. Earth. The Milky Way.

Around me, my colleagues argued minutiae with all the passion of religious zealots. The current debate concerned wording within a subsection of the departmental self-study. The room was stifling, the top-of-the-head poke-me-in-the-eye dull. We'd been in session for over two hours, and time was not flying.

I added spiral arms to the outermost of my concentric circles. Began filling spaces with dots. For a hundred billion stars in the galaxy. I wished I could put my chair into hyperdrive to any one of them.

Anthropology is a broad discipline, comprised of linked subspecialties. Physical. Cultural. Archaeological. Linguistic. Our department has the full quartet. Members of each group were feeling a need to have their say.

George Petrella is a linguist who researches myth as a narrative of individual and collective identity. Occasionally he says something I understand.

At the moment, Petrella was objecting to the wording "reducible to" four distinct fields. He was proposing substitution of the phrase "divisible into."

Cheresa Bickham, a Southwestern archaeologist, and Jennifer Roberts, a specialist in cross-cultural belief systems, were holding firm for "reducible to."

Tiring of my galactic pointillism, and not able to reduce or divide my ennui into any matters of interest, I switched to calligraphy.

Temperance. The trait of avoiding excess.

Double order, please. Side of restraint. Hold the ego.

Time check.

Two fifty-eight.

The verbiage flowed on.

At 3:10 a vote was taken. "Divisible into" carried the day.

Evander Doe, department chair for over a decade, was presiding. Though roughly my age, Doe looked like someone out of a Grant Wood painting. Bald. Owlsh wire-rims. Pachyderm ears.

Most who know Doe consider him dour. Not me. I've seen the man smile at least two or three times.

Having put "divisible into" behind him, Doe proceeded to the next burning issue. I halted my swirly lettering to listen.

Should the department's mission statement stress historical ties to the humanities and critical theory or should it emphasize the emerging role of the natural sciences and empirical observation?

My aborted autobiography had been smack on. I *would* die of boredom before this meeting adjourned.

Sudden mental image. The infamous sensory deprivation experiments of the 1950s. I picture volunteers wearing opaque goggles and padded hand muffs, lying on cots in white-noise chambers.

I listed their symptoms and compared them to my present state.

Anxiety. Depression. Antisocial behavior. Hallucination.

I crossed out the fourth item. Though stressed and irritable, I wasn't hallucinating. Yet. Not that I mind. A vivid vision would have provided diversion.

Don't get me wrong. I've not grown cynical about teaching. I love being a professor. I regret that my interaction with students seems more limited each year.

Why so little classroom time? Back to the subdiscipline thing.

Ever try to see just a doctor? Forget it. Cardiologist. Dermatologist. Endocrinologist. Gastroenterologist. It's a specialized world. My field is no different.

Anthropology: the study of the human organism. Physical anthropology: the study of the biological variability, and evolution of the human organism. Osteology: the study of the bones of the human organism. Forensic anthropology: the study of the bones of the human organism for legal purposes.

Follow the diverging branches, and there I am. Though my training was in bioarchaeology, and I started my career excavating and analyzing ancient remains, I shifted into forensics years ago. Crossed the dark side, my grad school buddies still tease. Drawn by fame and fortune. Yeah, right. Well, maybe some notoriety, but certainly no fortune.

Forensic anthropologists work with the recently dead. We're employed by law enforcement agencies, coroners, medical examiners, prosecutors, defense attorneys, the military, human rights groups, and mass disaster recovery teams. Drawing on our knowledge of biomechanics, genetics, and skeletal anatomy, we address questions of identification, cause of death, postmortem interval, and postmortem alteration of the corpse. We examine the burned, decomposed, mummified, mutilated, dismembered, and skeletal. Often by the time we see remains, they're too compromised for an autopsy to yield data of value.

As an employee of the state of North Carolina, I'm under contract to both UNC-Charlotte, and to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, which has facilities in Charlotte and Chapel Hill. In addition, I consult for the Laboratoire de sciences judiciaires et de médecine légale in Montreal.

North Carolina and Quebec? Extraordinaire. More on that later.

Because of my cross-border treks and my dual responsibilities within North Carolina, I teach only one course at UNCC, an upper-level seminar in forensic anthropology. This was my biannual semester in the classroom.

And the conference room.

I look forward to the teaching. It's the interminable meetings that I detest. And the faculty politics.

Someone moved that the mission statement be returned to committee for further study. Hands rose in opposition. I was concerned, the thing could be sent to Zimbabwe for permanent interment.

Doe introduced the next agenda item. Formation of a committee on professional ethics.

Inwardly groaning, I began a list of tasks requiring my attention.

1. *Specimens to Alex.*

Alex is my lab and teaching assistant. Using my selections, she would set up a bone quiz for the next seminar.

2. *Report to LaManche.*

Pierre LaManche is a pathologist, and chief of the medico-legal section at the LSJML. The last case I did before leaving Montreal the previous week was one of his, an auto-fire victim. According to my analysis, the charred corpse was that of a thirty-something white male.

Unfortunately for LaManche, the presumed driver should have been a fifty-nine-year-old Asian female. Unfortunately for the victim, someone had pumped two slugs into his left parietal. Unfortunately for me, the case was a homicide and would probably require my presence in court.

3. *Report to Larabee.*

Tim Larabee is the Mecklenburg County medical examiner, and director of the three-pathology Charlotte facility. His had been the first case I'd done upon returning to North Carolina, a bloated and decomposed lower torso washed up on the shore of the Catawba River. Pelvic structure had indicated the individual was male. Skeletal development had bracketed the age between twelve and fourteen. Healed fractures of the right fourth and fifth metatarsals had suggested the possibility of an ID from antemortem hospital records and X-rays, if such could be found.

4. *Phone Larabee.*

Arriving on campus today, I'd found a two-word voice mail from the MCME: *Call me.* I'd been dialing when Petrella came to drag me into the meeting from hell.

When last we'd spoken, Larabee had located no missing person reports that matched the Catawba River vic's profile. Perhaps he'd now found one. I hoped so, for the sake of the family. And the child.

I thought of the conversation Larabee would have with the parents. I've had those talks, delivered those life-shattering pronouncements. It's the worst part of my job. There is no easy way to tell a mother and father that their child is dead. That his legs have been found, but his head remains missing.

5. *Sorenstein recommendation.*

Rudy Sorenstein was an undergraduate with hopes of continuing his studies at Harvard or Berkeley. No letter from me was going to make that happen. But Rudy tried hard. Worked well with others. I'd give his mediocre GPA the best spin possible.

6. *Katy shopping.*

Kathleen Brennan Petersons is my daughter, living in Charlotte as of this fall, employed as a researcher in the public defender's office. Having spent the previous six years as an undergraduate at the University of Virginia, Katy was desperately in need of clothes made of fabric other than denim. And of money to buy them. I'd offered to serve as fashion consultant. There's irony. Pete, my estranged husband, was functioning as ways and means.

7. *Birdie litter.*

Birdie is my cat. He is fussy concerning matters of feline toilette, and expresses his displeasure in ways I try to prevent. Inconveniently, Birdie's preferred litter brand is available only in veterinary offices.

8. *Dental checkup.*

The notification had been delivered with yesterday's mail.

Sure. I'd get right on that.

9. *Dry cleaning.*

10. *Car inspection.*

11. *Shower door handle.*

I sensed, more than heard, an odd sound in the room. Stillness.

Glancing up, I realized attention was focused on me.

"Sorry." I shifted a hand to cover my tablet. Casually.

"Your preference, Dr. Brennan?"

"Read them back."

Doe listed what I assumed were three hotly contested names.

"Committee on Professional Responsibility and Conduct. Committee on the Evaluation of Ethical Procedures. Committee on Ethical Standards and Practices."

“The latter implies the imposition of rules set by an external body or regulating board.” Petrella was doing petulant.

Bickham threw her pen to the tabletop. “No. It does not. It is simp—”

“The department is creating an ethics committee, right?”

“It’s critical that the body’s title accurately reflects the philosophical underpinnings—”

“Yes.” Doe’s reply to my question cut Petrella off.

“Why not call it the Ethics Committee?”

Ten pairs of eyes froze on my face. Some looked confused. Some surprised. Some offended.

Petrella slumped back in his chair.

Bickham coughed.

Roberts dropped her gaze.

Doe cleared his throat. Before he could speak, a soft knock broke the silence.

“Yes?” Doe.

The door opened, and a face appeared in the crack. Round. Freckled. Worried. Twenty-two curious eyes swiveled to it.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Naomi Gilder was the newest of the departmental secretaries. And the most timid. “I wouldn’t, of course, except . . .”

Naomi’s gaze slid to me.

“Dr. Larabee said it was urgent that he speak with Dr. Brennan.”

My first impulse was to do an arm-pump *Yes!* Instead, I raised acquiescent brows and palms. *Duty calls. What can one do?*

Gathering my papers, I left the room and practically danced across the reception area and down the corridor lined with faculty offices. Every door was closed. Of course they were. The occupants were cloistered in a windowless conference room arguing administrative trivia.

I felt exhilarated. Free!

Entering my office, I punched Larabee’s number. My eyes drifted to the window. Four floors down, rivers of students flowed to and from late-afternoon classes. Low, angled rays bronzed the trees and ferns of Van Landing-ham Glen. When I’d entered the meeting the sun had been straight overhead.

“Larabee.” The voice was a little on the high side, with a soft Southern accent.

“It’s Tempe.”

“Did I drag you from something important?”

“Pretentious pomposity.”

“Sorry?”

“Never mind. Is this regarding the Catawba River floater?”

“Twelve-year-old from Mount Holly name of Anson Tyler. Parents were on a gambling junket in Vegas. Returned day before yesterday, discovered the kid hadn’t been home for a week.”

“How did they calculate that?”

“Counted the remaining Pop-Tarts.”

“You obtained medical records?”

“I want your take, of course, but I’d bet the farm the broken toes on Tyler’s X-rays match those on our vic.”

I thought of little Anson alone in his house. Watching TV. Making peanut butter sandwiches and toasting Pop-Tarts. Sleeping with the lights on.

The feeling of exhilaration began to fade.

“What morons go off and leave a twelve-year-old child?”

“The Tylers won’t be getting nominations for parents of the year.”

“They’ll be charged with child neglect?”

“Minimally.”

“Is Anson Tyler the reason you called?” According to Naomi, Larabee had said urgent. Positive ID didn’t usually fall into that category.

“Earlier. But not now. Just got off the horn with the homicide boys. They may have a nasty situation.”

I listened.

Trepidation quashed the last lingering traces of exhilaration.

“NO DOUBT IT’S HUMAN?” I ASKED.

“At least one skull.”

“There’s more than one?”

“The reporting unit suggested the possibility, but didn’t want to touch anything until you arrived.”

“Good thinking.”

Scenario: Citizen stumbles onto bones, calls 911. Cops arrive, figure the stuff’s old, start bagging and tagging. Bottom line: Context is lost, scene is screwed. I end up working in a vacuum.

Scenario: Dogs unearth a clandestine grave. Local coroner goes at it with shovels and a body bag. Bottom line: Bits are missed. I get remains with a lot of gaps.

When faced with these situations, I’m not always kind in my remarks. Over the years, my message has gotten across.

That, plus the fact that I teach body recovery workshops for the ME in Chapel Hill, and for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg PD.

“Cop said the place stinks,” Larabee added.

That didn’t sound good.

I grabbed a pen. “Where?”

“Greenleaf Avenue, over in First Ward. House is being renovated. Plumber knocked through a wall and found some sort of underground chamber. Hang on.”

Paper rustled, then Larabee read the address. I wrote it down.

“Apparently this plumber was totally freaked.”

“I can head over there now.”

“That would be good.”

“See you in thirty.”

I heard a hitch in Larabee’s breathing.

“Problem?” I asked.

“I’ve got a kid open on the table.”

“What happened?”

“Five-year-old came home from kindergarten, ate a doughnut, complained of a bellyache, hit the floor. She was pronounced dead two hours later at CMC. Story to tear your heart out. An only child, no prior medicals, completely asymptomatic until the incident.”

“Jesus. What killed her?”

“Cardiac rhabdomyoma.”

“Which is?”

“Big honking tumor in the interventricular septum. Pretty rare at her age. These kids usually die in infancy.”

Poor Larabee was facing more than one heartbreaking conversation.

“Finish your autopsy,” I said. “I’ll handle the chamber of horrors.”

Charlotte began with a river and a road.

~~The river came first. Not the Mississippi or Orinoco, but a sturdy enough stream, its shores rich with deer, bear, bison, and turkey. Great flocks of pigeons flew overhead.~~

Those living among the wild pea vines on the river's eastern bank called their waterway Eswa Taro "the great river." They, in turn, were called the Catawba, "people of the river."

The principal Catawba village, Nawvasa, was situated at the headwater of Sugar Creek, Soogaw, Sugau, meaning "group of huts," a development not based solely on proximity to the water. Nawvasa all snuggled up to a busy route of aboriginal commerce, the Great Trading Path. Goods and foodstuffs flowed along this path from the Great Lakes to the Carolinas, then on down to the Savannah River.

Nawvasa drew its lifeblood from both the river and the road.

The arrival of strange men on great ships ended all that.

For helping in his restoration to power, England's King Charles II awarded eight men the land south of Virginia and westward to the "South Seas." Charlie's new "lord proprietors" promptly sent people to map and explore their holdings.

Over the next century, settlers came in wagons, on horseback, and wearing out shoe leather. German, French Huguenots, Swiss, Irish, and Scots. Slowly, inexorably, the river and the road passed from Catawban to European hands.

Log homes and farms replaced native bark houses. Taverns, inns, and shops sprang up. Churches. courthouse. At an intersection with a lesser trail, a new village straddled the Great Trading Path.

In 1761, George III married Duchess Sophia Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, Germany. Her seventeen-year-old bride must have caught the imagination of those living between the river and the road. Or perhaps the populace wished to curry favor with the mad British king. Whatever the motive, they named their little village Charlotte Town, their county Mecklenburg.

But distance and politics doomed the friendship to failure. The American colonies were growing angry and ripe for revolt. Mecklenburg County was no exception.

In May 1775, peeved at his majesty's refusal to grant a charter for their beloved Queens College, and incensed that redcoats had fired on Americans in Lexington, Massachusetts, Charlotte Town's leaders assembled. Dispensing with diplomacy and tactful phrasing, they drafted the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence in which they declared themselves "a free and independent people."

Yessiree. The folks who wrote the Mec Dec didn't mess around. A year before the Continental Congress put pen to paper, they told old George to take a hike.

You know the rest of the story. Revolution. Emancipation and civil war. Reconstruction and Jim Crow. Industrialization, meaning textiles and railroads in North Carolina. World wars and depression. Segregation and civil rights. Rust Belt decline, Sun Belt renaissance.

By 1970, the Charlotte metro population had grown to roughly 400,000. By 2005, that number had doubled. Why? Something new was traveling the path. Money. And places to stash it. While many states had laws limiting the number of branches a bank could have, the North Carolina legislature said "be fruitful and multiply."

And multiply they did. The many branches led to many deposits, and the many deposits led to very much fruit. Long story short, the Queen City is home to two banking-industry heavies, Bank of America and Wachovia. As Charlotte's citizenry never tires of chortling, their burg ranks second only to New York City as a U.S. financial center.

Trade and Tryon streets now overlies the old trading path and its intersecting trail. Dominating the crossroads is the Bank of America Corporate Center, a fitting totem in sleek glass, stone, and steel.

From Trade and Tryon, old Charlotte's core spreads outward as a block of quadrants called

uncreatively, First, Second, Third, and Fourth Wards. Blinded by a vision of their town as a child of the New South, ~~Charlotteans have historically cared little about preserving these inner-city zones.~~ The single and relatively recent, exception has been numero quatro.

The northwestern quadrant, Fourth Ward, was built by the town's nineteenth-century elite, the slipped into genteel decay. In the midseventies, spurred by the steel-magnolia force of the Junior League ladies, and some friendly financing by the banks, Fourth Ward became the focus of intense restoration effort. Today, its grand old homes share narrow streets with old-timey pubs and quaint modern townhouses. Gas lamps. Brick pavers. Park in the middle. You get the picture.

Back in the day, Second Ward was the flip side of lilywhite Fourth. Lying southeast of the city center, Log Town, later known as Brooklyn, occupied much of the ward's acreage. Home to black preachers, doctors, dentists, and teachers, the Brooklyn neighborhood is now largely extinct, cleared for the construction of Marshall Park, the Education Center, a government plaza, and a freeway connector to I-77.

First and Third Wards lie to the northeast and southwest, respectively. Once crowded with depot factories, rail yards, and mills, these quarters are now crammed with apartments, townhouses, and condos. Courtside. Quarterside. The Renwick. Oak Park. Despite the city's policy of raze and replace, here and there a few old residential pockets remain. Larabee's directions were sending me to one in Third Ward.

Exiting I-77 onto Morehead, my gaze took in the monoliths forming the city skyline. One Wachovia Center. The Westin Hotel. The seventy-four-thousand-seat Panthers stadium. What, I wondered, would the residents of Nawvasa think of the metropolis superimposed on their village?

I made a left at the bottom of the ramp, another onto Cedar, and rolled past a cluster of recently converted warehouses. A truncated rail line. The Light Factory photo studios and gallery. A homeless shelter.

On my right stretched the Panthers training complex, practice fields muted green in the predusk light. Turning left onto Greenleaf, I entered a tunnel of willow oaks. Straight ahead lay an expanse of openness I knew to be Frazier Park.

A bimodal assortment of homes lined both sides of the street. Many had been purchased by yuppies desiring proximity to uptown, modernized, painted colors like Queen Anne Lilac or Smythe Tavern Blue. Others remained with their original African-American owners, some looking weathered and worn among their gentrified neighbors, the deed holders awaiting the next tax reevaluation with trepidation.

Despite the contrast between the born-agains and the yet-to-be-re-created, the work of caring hands was evident up and down the block. Walks were swept. Lawns were mowed. Window boxes overflowed with marigolds or mums.

Larabee's address belonged to one of the few exceptions, a seedy little number with patched siding, sagging trim, and peeling paint. The yard was mostly dirt, and the front porch featured a truckload of nondegradable trash. Pulling to the curb behind a Charlotte-Mecklenburg PD cruiser, I wondered how many wannabe purchasers had knocked on the bungalow's faded green door.

Alighting, I locked the Mazda and took my field kit from the trunk. Two houses down, a boy of about twelve shot a basketball into a garage-mounted hoop. His radio pounded out rap as his ball *thumped* softly on the gravel drive.

The walkway was humped where bulging tree roots snaked beneath. I kept my eyes down as I mounted warped wooden steps to the porch.

"You the one I gotta talk to so's I can go home?"

My gaze moved up.

A man occupied a rusted and precariously angled swing. He was tall and thin, with hair the color of apricot jam. Embroidered above his shirt pocket were the name *Arlo* and a stylized wrench.

Arlo had been seated with knees wide, elbows on thighs, face planted on upturned palms. Hearing footsteps, he'd raised his head to speak.

Before I could respond, Arlo posed a second question.

"How long I gotta stay here?"

"You're the gentleman who called in the nine-one-one?"

Arlo grimaced, revealing a rotten tooth among the lower rights.

I stepped onto the porch. "Can you describe what you saw?"

"I done that." Arlo clasped dirty hands. His gray pants were ripped at the left knee.

"You've given a statement?" Gently. The man's body language suggested genuine distress.

Arlo nodded, head moving crosswise to a torso canted at the same slope as the swing.

"Can you summarize what you saw?"

Now the head wagged from side to side. "The devil's work."

OK.

"You are Arlo... ?"

"Welton."

"The plumber."

Arlo gave another bobble-head nod. "Been banging pipes for thirty years. Never come across nothing like this."

"Tell me what happened."

Arlo swallowed. Swallowed again.

"I'm changing out fittings. The new owner's missus is planning to put in some newfangled wash setup, some kinda green thing saves the environment. It'll need different pipe fittings. Lord knows what she wants to start with that, place needing all it does. But that's not my business. Anyways, I start in on the wall and drop a piece of brick that takes a bite outa the flooring. I think to myself, Arlo, you cut the flooring, they're gonna take the cost of repairs outa your wages. So I roll back the flooring, and what do I find but a big ole wood plank."

Arlo stopped.

I waited.

"Don't know why, but I give the thing a nudge with my toe, and the end raised up in the air."

Again Arlo paused, recalling, I suspected, a bit more than a nudge.

"This plank was part of a hatch that opened?"

"Thing was covering some kinda hidey-hole. I'll admit, curiosity got the better of me. I took my flashlight and shined it on down."

"Into a subcellar."

Arlo shrugged. I allowed him time to continue. He didn't.

"And?" I prompted again.

"I'm a churchgoing man. Every Sunday and Wednesday. Never seen the devil, but I believe in him. Believe he's in the world, working his evil amongst us."

Arlo ran the back of a hand across his mouth.

"What I seen was Satan himself."

Though the day was still warm, I felt a chill ripple through me.

"You reported that you saw a human skull." All business.

"Yes'm."

"What else?"

"Don't want to put words to wickedness. It's best you see with your own eyes."

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