

# Kathy Reichs

## A CONSPIRACY OF BONES

A TEMPERANCE BRENNAN NOVEL



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Reactions to pressure vary. Some people are ductile, able to stretch. Others are brittle, powerless to bend. Physicists talk of stress-strain curves. One thing is certain. If the burden is too great, or the loading too rapid, anyone can snap.

I know. I reached my breaking point the summer after my boss was murdered. *Moi*. The igneous rock of emotion. And I'm not talking about just the nightmares.

To be fair, Larabee's death wasn't the immediate or sole trigger. There was Andrew Ryan, my longtime lover and cop-partner in investigating homicides in Quebec. Succumbing to pressure, I'd agreed to cohabit with Ryan on both the Montreal and Charlotte ends of our geographically complex relationship. There was Katy's posting in Afghanistan. Mama's cancer. Pete's news about Boyd. My diagnosis, then surgery. The migraines. A world of stressors was chafing my personal curve.

Looking back, I admit I spun out of orbit. Perhaps going rogue was an attempt to steer unsteerable forces. A bird-flip to aging. To the renegade vessel threatening havoc in my brain. Perhaps it was a cry for Ryan's attention. A subconscious effort to drive him away? Or maybe it was just the goddamn Carolina heat.

Who knows? I was holding my own until the faceless man sent me over the edge. His remains and the subsequent investigation punched a black hole in my smug little world.

My mother spotted the changes long before the enigmatic corpse turned up. The distractedness. The agitation. The short temper. She blamed it all on the aneurysm. From the moment of its discovery, Mama was convinced the little bubble would burst and my own blood would take me out. I scoffed at her critique of my behavior, knowing she was right. I was ignoring emails, the phone. Declining invitations in favor of solo bingeing on old Hollywood flicks. Hell, I'd watched my favorite, *Annie Hall*, four times.

I didn't tell Mama about the nighttime visitations. Twisting montages filled with dark figures and vague dangers. Or frustrating tasks I couldn't complete. Anxiety? Hormones? The headache meds I was forced to ingest? Irrelevant the root of my irritability. I was sleeping little, constantly restless, and exhausted.

It didn't take Freud to recognize I was in a bad place.

So there I was, wide awake in the wee hours, talking myself down from a dream about a storm and snakes and Larabee sealed in a body bag. Ole Sigmund might have offered a comment on that.

I tried deep breathing. A relaxation exercise starting with my toes. No sale.

Nerves on edge, I got up and crossed to the window. Two floors below, the grounds spread out around my townhouse, dark and still save for the lank twisting of a leaf in the occasional half-hearted breeze. I was turning away when my eyes caught a flicker of movement beside the pine on my neighbor's front lawn.

Peering hard, I made out a silhouette. Bulky. Male?

On the grounds of Sharon Hall at midnight?

Heart pumping a bit faster, I blinked to refocus.

The silhouette had blended into the shadows.

Had someone actually been there?

Curious, I pulled on a pair of discarded shorts and my Nikes and went downstairs. I wasn't planning to confront the guy, if there *was* a guy; I just wanted to determine his reason for being outside my home at that hour.

In the kitchen, I switched off the alarm and slipped out the back door onto my terrace. The weather was beyond Dixie summer-night warm, the air hot and muggy, the leaves as droopy and discouraged

as they'd appeared from upstairs. Spotting no prowler, I circled the building. Still no one. I set off on one of the paths crisscrossing the estate.

It had rained as I'd eaten my microwave-pizza dinner at ten, and moisture still hung thick in the air. Puddles glistened black on the gravel, went yellow as my fuzzy shadow and I passed under quaint-as-hell carriage lights blurred by mist.

The tiny pond was a dark void, woolly where the water met the bank. Murky shapes glided its surface, silent, aware of their tenuous state. The homeowners' association fights an endless, often creative battle. No matter the deterrent, the geese always return.

I was passing a black Lego form I knew to be a small gazebo when I sensed more than heard another presence. I stopped. Stared.

A man was standing in the smear of shadow within the gazebo. His face was down, his features obscured. Medium height and build. I could tell little else about him. Except two things.

First, I didn't know him. He wasn't a resident, and I'd never seen him visit.

Second, despite the stifling heat, the man was wearing a trench coat. When he raised an arm, perhaps to check a watch, the fabric flashed pale in the gloom enveloping him.

I glanced nervously over my shoulder.

Crap. Why hadn't I brought my phone? Easy one there. Because the damn thing was dead. Again.

Fine. Why hadn't I at least lit the porch light? Go home and call 311 to report a prowler? 911?

I turned back. The gazebo was empty. I checked in both directions along the path. To the right, the left. The man wasn't on it.

The mist began to morph back into rain. Listless drops tested for foothold on my face and hair. Time to head in.

Suddenly, beyond the circle drive, I caught a wink of gray. There, then gone.

Shot of adrenaline. Was Trench Coat targeting me? Casing the layout of Sharon Hall? If not, what was he doing here in the rain in the middle of the night? And why so elusive?

Or was my wariness a product of paranoia, another gift from my

overburdened stress-strain curve. Either way, I was glad I'd left pepper spray in my shorts pocket after my previous run.

Perhaps roused by the unsettling dream, images of Larabee's last moments unspooled in my head. The gray-green pallor of his skin. The eerie glow of the surgical-trauma ICU. The impartial pinging of the monitors recording their bloodless peaks and valleys. The screaming silence when the pinging stopped. Later, in an interview room smelling of sweat and fear, the slouchy indifference of the brain-fried twaker who'd sent the bullets into my longtime boss's belly.

*Stop!*

Aloud? Or just in my mind?

I lengthened my stride, footfalls crunching softly in the stillness.

A full minute, then a trench-coated form, far up where the path emptied into a residents' parking area. The man was walking with an odd swinging gait, his back to me.

Suddenly, noise seemed to ricochet from all around. Rustling leaves. Shifting branches. Snapping twigs. Night creatures? Trench Coat's geeked-out pals looking to fund more meth?

I had no valuables—carried no money, wore no watch. Would that anger them?

Or were the sounds the invention of overwrought nerves?

I patted the pepper spray at my right hip. Felt the canister. Pink and nasty. A molecule of the price I'd paid had been donated toward breast-cancer research.

Momentary indecision.

Head home? Continue on the path and observe the man? Confront him in the parking lot? There were streetlamps there, overwhelmed but trying their best.

I slowed. Trench Coat was now just ten yards ahead.

My brain chose that moment to unreel a blockbuster tableau.

When I approached, the man would pull a knife and try to slit my throat.

*Jesus!*

Why was I letting this guy fluster me? In my line of work, I encounter far worse than a dude dressed like Bogie in *Casablanca*. Outlaw bikers who chainsaw the heads and hands from their murdered rivals.

Macho pricks who stalk and strangle their terrified exes. Drunken bullies who wall-slam fussy infants. Those lowlifes don't dissuade me from focusing on my job. Quite the reverse. They inspire me to work harder.

So why the drama over a man in a belted coat? Why the sense of threat? It was doubtful the guy was a psycho. More likely a harmless geezer overly sensitive to damp.

Either way, I owed it to my neighbors to find out. I'd use the hedge as cover and follow him for a while. If he acted suspicious, I'd go inside and dial the cops. Let them decide.

I wriggled through a gap in the bushes, moved along their far side a few yards, then paused to scan the parking lot.

The man was there, standing under one of the struggling lamps. His chin was raised, his features vaguely discernible as dark blotches on a smudgy white rectangle.

My breath froze.

The guy was staring straight at me.

Or was he?

Unnerved, I pivoted to search for the opening in the shrubbery at my back. Couldn't find it. Dived in where the darkness seemed less dense. The tunnel was narrow, barely there, or not there at all. Twigs and leaves snagged my arms and hair, skeletal fingers clawing me back.

My breathing sounded louder, more desperate, as though fighting entrapment by the thick vegetation. The air was heavy with the scent of wet bark, damp earth, and my own perspiration.

A few feet, then I was free and hurrying back toward the pond. Not the way I'd come, a new route. More shadowed. Less open.

Imperceptibly, a new odor entered the olfactory mix. A familiar odor. An odor that triggered a fresh wave of adrenaline.

I was catching whiffs of decomposing flesh.

Impossible.

Yet there it was. Stark and cold as the images haunting my dreams.

A minute of scrambling around a stand of azaleas and philodendron, then I detected a thawing in one slice of the darkness ahead. Within the slice, angles and planes of shadow shifting and tilting out on the lawn.

Trench Coat's minions lying in wait?

I was almost to the edge of the garden when a rip-your-face-off snarl brought me up short. As my mind struggled to form a rational explanation, a high-pitched scream sent every hair on my arms and neck upright.

Hand shaking, I pulled the pepper spray from my pocket and inched forward.

Beyond the shrubs, out where the lawn met the eastern wall of the property, two dogs were locked in winner-take-all combat. The larger, the scraggy consequence of some Lab-pit bull affair, was all hackles, bared teeth, and gleaming white sclera. The smaller, probably a terrier, cowered, tense and timorous, blood and spit matting the fur on one haunch. Neither animal was familiar to me.

Unaware of my presence, or not caring, the Lab-pit braced, then lunged for another attack. The terrier yelped and tried to flatten itself even more to the ground, desperate to reduce the amount of mass it presented to the world.

The Lab-pit held a moment, then, confident that rank had been established, pivoted and trotted toward a dark mound lying at the base of the wall. As the terrier slunk off, tail curled to its belly, the Lab-pit sniffed the air, scanned its surroundings, then lowered its head.

I watched, spellbound, curious about the cause of the fight.

A flurry of thrashing and tugging, then the victor's snout rose.

Clamped in the dog's jaw was the severed head of a goose, ravaged neck glistening black, cheek swath winking white like the smile of an evil clown.

I watched rain fall on the bird's sightless eye.