

Kathy Reichs

THE BONE CODE

A TEMPERANCE BRENNAN NOVEL



**SIMON &
SCHUSTER**

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

1

Tuesday, October 5

The kid was dead. No doubt about that. The 911 caller thought so. The ER reported her DOA. The toxicologist showed cause. The ME signed the certificate.

The kid was dead. That wasn't the question.

The phone rang. I ignored it.

Beyond my window, the sky was a chaos of gunmetal, smoke, and green. The wind was blowing angrier by the second.

I'd have to go soon.

The palette on my screen mirrored the turmoil outside. Within the gray backdrop of flesh, the bones burned white as Arctic snow.

I'd been analyzing the X-rays for almost two hours, my frustration escalating with the storm.

One last glance at the final plate in the series. The hands. Then it was adios.

I forced myself to concentrate. Carpals. Metacarpals. Phalanges.

Suddenly, I sat forward, the gusts and thickening darkness forgotten.

I zoomed in on the right fifth digit. The left.

The phone rang. Again, I paid no attention.

I shifted back to the cranial views.

A theory began to take shape.

I was poking at it, twisting the idea this way and that, when a voice at my back caused me to jump.

Framed in the doorway was a woman not much bigger than the subject of the films I was viewing. Standing maybe five feet tall, she had gray-streaked black hair drawn into a knot at the nape of her neck. Thick bangs brushed the top of tortoiseshell frames not chosen for fashion.

“Dr. Nguyen,” I said. “I didn’t realize you were still here.”

“I was completing an autopsy.” Slight accent, mostly Boston but with an undercurrent of something more exotic.

Nguyen had taken charge at the Mecklenburg County Medical Examiner’s office only recently, so she and I were still testing the waters with each other. Though not exactly effervescent, she seemed organized, fair, and earnest. So far, so good.

“Is that the Deacon case?” Nguyen’s gaze had shifted to my screen.

“It is.”

“You’re advising the family?”

“Yes.” Seeing her raised eyebrows, I added, “The request came from an attorney named Lloyd Thorn. I hope you don’t mind me viewing the films here.”

“Of course not.” Nguyen flicked a wrist, as though to brush away the thought. Maybe to help her change tack. “Inara is now a Cat Three storm and moving faster than predicted. A mandatory evacuation has been ordered for all coastal counties, and it’s expected to sweep inland.”

“Ain’t climate change grand?”

Nguyen ignored my quip. “I’m closing the lab. Mrs. Flowers has already left. She plans to head into the mountains to stay with a cousin.”

Eunice Flowers has been the MCME receptionist since Gutenberg began cranking out Bibles. The first to arrive each day, she is normally the last to depart.

“There’s a woman in the lobby who wishes to see you. Mrs. Flowers told her you were unavailable, but she insists on waiting.”

“Who is she?” A glance at the phone showed the message signal flashing red.

“I’ve no idea. Or why she ventured out in this weather.”

“I’ll talk to her.” Feeling a flicker of guilt for disregarding Mrs. Flowers’s calls.

“Don’t linger too long,” Nguyen warned.

“No worries.” Moving the cursor to close the X-ray file. “My cat is probably dialing a rescue hotline as we speak.”

“I’m certain Charlotte is safe.” Lacking conviction. “We’re much too far from the coast.”

I said nothing, recalling similar thinking back in ’89. And Hurricane Hugo.

Though it was only 3:20 p.m., little light filtered in through the lobby doors or windows. All was quiet inside the building. Save for the security guard, not in evidence but undoubtedly present, I seemed to be the only person left on the premises.

The woman sat in the chair opposite Mrs. Flowers’s command post. Her feet, shod in sensible oxfords, rested primly side by side on the carpet. She appeared to be studying the laces.

My first thought: the woman was the dowdy aunt from Peoria. A ratty shawl wrapped her from shoulder to calf, and a floral print scarf, tied babushka style, covered her hair. A curved-handled umbrella hung from one wrist, and a frayed tweed tote sat centered on her lap.

My second thought: why the cold-weather gear when the thermometer that day had registered an unseasonable eighty degrees?

Upon hearing my footfalls, the woman lifted her chin, and her babushka’d head rotated slowly, tracking my approach. The rest of her body seemed clenched in a knot.

Drawing close, I noted that the woman’s eyes were pale—not

the usual blue or green but a shade closer to that of honey in a jar. I estimated her age at sixty-five minimum. Mostly based on the attire. The scarf hid much of her face.

“I’m Temperance Brennan. I apologize for your wait.”

One hand rose to clutch mine. Though blue-veined and knobby, the intensity of its grip took me by surprise.

“Thank you so much. Thank you. I understand. Yes, of course. I’ve waited a long time. I don’t mind a bit more.”

Using the umbrella for support, the woman started to push to her feet. I gestured her back down. “Please. Don’t get up.”

I placed my briefcase on the floor and perched on the adjacent chair, pointedly not settling back.

“So, then. You are . . .?”

“Oh, dear me. Excuse my rudeness. I should have introduced myself at the outset. My name is Polly Susanne Beecroft.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Beecroft. I—”

“It’s Miss. Don’t give a patoot about titles.” The breathy “p” fluttered the silk framing her face. “If one never married, what’s the harm in saying so? Don’t you agree?”

“Mm.”

“But please, call me Polly.”

“How can I help you, Polly?” I asked, wanting to wrap this up quickly.

“I hope you will excuse my rather cheeky approach.” The honey eyes locked onto mine. “I’ve come to implore your help.”

“I am a forensic anthrop—”

“Yes, yes, of course. That’s why I believe you’re the person I need.”

“I’m listening.”

“It’s a bit of a tale.”

I gestured encouragement I didn’t feel.

Beecroft drew a quick breath, as though to begin. Seconds passed. No words left her lips.

“Don’t be nervous,” I reassured.

Tight nod. Then, “My twin sister died last year, bless her soul. She was seventy-three years old.”

I now knew where this was headed. Still, I didn't interrupt.

"Harriet married but was widowed young, so she never had children. She began studying art in her thirties, from then on was totally caught up in her painting. I'm afraid she and I were not fruitful like the Bible instructs." Quick grin. "Following Harriet's death—"

"Miss Beecroft—"

"Polly. Please."

"I'm very sorry for your loss, Polly. But if you have issues regarding your sister's passing, you must raise them with the coroner or medical examiner who signed the death certificate."

"Oh, no. Not at all. Harriet died in hospice of pancreatic cancer."

OK. I was wrong about the purpose of Beecroft's visit. Realizing that and, I'll admit, a tad curious, I said nothing.

"Since I was Harriet's only kin, it fell to me to clear out her home. She lived in Virginia, in a small town not far from Richmond. But that's unimportant. While going through her things, I discovered several items that have troubled me greatly."

The overhead lights wavered, then steadied.

"Oh, my." One liver-spotted hand fluttered up and hovered, like a moth suddenly free and confused.

"Perhaps this could wait a day or two, until the storm has passed?" I suggested gently.

But Beecroft wasn't to be dissuaded. "May I show you what I found? I'll be oh so brief. Then it's off I go."

An image fired in my brain. My near-octogenarian mother struggling to control an umbrella in a gale.

"Did you drive here, Polly?" I asked.

"Oh, heavens. No. I came by taxi."

Crap.

"Do you live in town?"

"I have a condo at Rosewood. Do you know it?"

I knew it well. Mama had recently moved to Rosewood. I now had an inkling how Beecroft had made her way to me.

I also had an inkling that the frumpy garb was misleading.

Rosewood is a nine-acre complex modeled on George Vanderbilt's nineteenth-century getaway in Asheville. Life in the three-towered extravaganza did not come cheap. Beecroft had means.

"Taxis may be scarce in this storm." *Crap. Crap.* "How about you outline your concerns as I drive you home?"

"I couldn't possibly impose."

"It's on my way." It wasn't.

"That's so terribly generous. I knew you would be a kind person. Very well. But first you must see something."

The kind person watched Beecroft dig an envelope from the tote and draw three photos from it. Withholding two, she offered one to me.

"This was made in 1966. I'm with my sister. We were feeling a bit naughty that afternoon."

The picture was in color though somewhat faded. A close-up and obviously posed, the shot had been snapped outside on a sunny day. Two teenage girls stood behind a wall with only their heads visible, chins and forearms resting on the top row of bricks. Each had chestnut hair, worn center-parted and ear-tucked. Each had the odd honey-colored eyes.

Both girls grinned mischievously while staring straight into the lens. They looked identical.

I studied the image, feeling a vague sense of unease. Of recognition? But that was impossible.

Beecroft's words cut into my thoughts. "—didn't take as many photos back then. Not like today, with young people capturing every second of their lives, posting images of themselves flossing their teeth or cleaning the pantry or torturing the cat, or whatever. Really. Does anyone care about such triviality? But do forgive me. I digress.

"The quality has deteriorated, but our faces are still quite clear. I'm on the left, Harriet is on the right. We were eighteen at the time. We'd just graduated from high school and been admitted to Vassar. But that is also irrelevant. How I do go on."

Beecroft offered another photo, this one encased in a protective

sleeve. I laid the first on the table beside me, took the second, and observed it through the plastic.

The sepia tones and white cracks suggested that this image was considerably older. As did the formal pose and style of clothing.

But the subject matter was similar. Two teenage girls looked straight at the camera, one seated, one standing with her hand on the chair back. Both wore high-necked, long-sleeved dresses with complexly draped ankle-length skirts. Neither smiled.

The resemblance to Polly and Harriet Beecroft was uncanny.

I looked up, seeking explanation.

“That’s my grandmother and her sister,” Beecroft said. “They, too, were twins.”

My eyes dropped back to the picture.

“That portrait was made in 1887. They were seventeen years old.”

“They look exactly—”

“Yes,” Beecroft said. “They do. Did.”

Then Beecroft handed me the final photo.

Hollow silence echoed around us, punctuated by the rumbles of the mounting tempest.

I heard nothing. Saw nothing but the image in my hand.

I swallowed, too shaken to speak.

Tuesday, October 5

Both Carolinas have miles of coastline, so hurricanes aren't uncommon. Wilmington. New Bern. Myrtle Beach. Charleston. At one time or another, each has been slammed.

Charlotte is up in the piedmont, so largely safe, but if a hurricane or snow warning is issued, the Queen City goes berserk. Schools and courts close. Supermarkets empty. Generators and batteries disappear. Usually, it's then a big fizzle. We sweep up and resume bagging groceries, meeting clients, and driving carpool.

I'm not an alarmist. Far from it. But the weather that day appeared determined to live up to the hype. The rain was holding off, but the barometric pressure felt about a billion pounds per square inch, with gusts growing more belligerent by the second.

A shawl and a babushka aren't aerodynamically suited to wind, but the oxfords were a prudent choice. Though the walk to Beecroft's entrance was challenging, we managed.

Normally, I'd have checked on Mama, but she was away on one of her spiritual healing adventures. Arizona? The Catskills? I wasn't sure. Made a mental note to phone her.

From Rosewood, it wasn't far to Sharon Hall, the turn-of-the-

century mansion-turned-condo-complex in which I own a unit called the annex. No one knows when the tiny two-story structure was built. Or why. The annex appears on none of the old deeds or property maps. I don't care that its tale is forever lost to history. In fact, the enigma is part of the appeal.

I moved into the annex following the collapse of my marriage and during my occupancy have changed little save bulbs and filters. Until recently. Now a spiffy new study occupies space that for eons had served as an attic.

For the briefest instant, an image flashed. Craggy face, heart-spinning blue eyes, sandy hair losing out to gray.

My chest tightened. Thoughts of my new roommate, Andrew Ryan? Or the fierce blast of air that rocked the car?

A brief note about Ryan, *Équipe des Crimes contre la Personne, Sûreté du Québec*. Since he worked homicide for the SQ, the police in La Belle Province, and I am the forensic anthropologist there for the LSJML—the *Laboratoire de Sciences Judiciaires et de Médecine Légale*—the *lieutenant-déetective* and I have collaborated on murder investigations for decades, working out of the same headquarters in Montreal. Somewhere along the way, we began to date. Then we began to, well, more than date. Now we live together. Sort of.

More on that later.

After arriving at the annex, I muscled the car door open. It shut itself. Hunched forward, I hurried inside, hair whipping, briefcase twisting this way and that.

“Birdie?” Setting my purse and case on the counter.

No response from the cat. Not surprising. Climatic extremes upset his feline psyche.

“I'm home, Bird.”

Still nothing.

Like the MCME lobby, the interior of the annex was unnaturally dark for midafternoon. I hit the wall switch and turned on a dining-room lamp, then climbed the stairs to my bedroom. As I was yanking

off my Nikes, a small white face peeked from beneath the bed, ears flattened as low as possible.

“Chill, big guy. It’s just a little wind.”

Birdie studied me, wary. Perhaps irritated. Hard to tell with cats.

Or maybe he was picking up on my own anxiety. The weather really did look bad. Should I stay and ride it out? Or head for a motel in the foothills?

A gust fired a volley of gravel against the side of the house. The cat face withdrew back into its refuge.

“Fine. I’ll see what the experts are saying.”

Returning to the kitchen, I located the remote and navigated to the local twenty-four-hour news station. Hit mute as I waited out a guy offering to clean my gutters. An ad for Bojangles chicken. A promo for an upcoming Panthers game.

Eventually, the feed cut to an anchor seated behind a glass-topped desk with tiny lights looping its front-facing surface. John Medford. I’d met him a few times at charity fundraisers. Knew his pompadour was higher than his IQ.

Over Medford’s right shoulder, a graphic showed a regional map framed by another array of twinkly lights. An alarming green blob hovered to the southeast of Charlotte. A chyron at the bottom of the screen stated: *Inara is coming!*

I activated the sound. Medford’s voice was neutral, his brows canted at just enough of an angle to show appropriate concern.

“—at least one model shows her slamming into Charleston, then being squeezed between the clockwise circulation of a high-pressure system out in the Atlantic and the counterclockwise push of low pressure in the Mississippi Valley. Sound familiar to you longtimers out there? It should. That’s the combo that sent Hugo barreling at us back in ’eighty-nine. Of course, just one model is saying that. Others see the storm skimming the coast, then hightailing it offshore. But it’s always best to be prepared.”

A bullet list appeared beside the map. Medford worked through the points, putting his folksy touch on each.

"I'm sure y'all know the drill, but it never hurts repeating. Should Inara come our way, stay inside, preferably in an interior room—maybe a closet or a bathroom—and away from windows, skylights, and glass doors."

OK. Birdie had me there.

"If flooding threatens your home, cut the electricity at the main breaker. If you lose power, turn off your major appliances—you know, the air conditioner, the water heater—big-ticket items you don't want damaged. And you'd best not use small appliances, either, including your computer."

Shit. Did my laptop and mobile have juice? As I dug both devices from my briefcase and plugged them in to charge, Medford droned on.

"I'm figuring we'll be fine here in Charlotte, but it could be a real boomer over at the shore." Encouraging smile. "Stay tuned. I'll be back in thirty with an update."

The station went to another commercial break. I hit mute again and was reaching for my cell phone when it rang. Warbled, actually. After checking caller ID, I answered.

"Hey, Ryan."

"Bonjour, ma chère."

"You still up in Yellowknife?"

After retiring from the SQ, Ryan went into business as a PI. At the moment, he was investigating something having to do with diamond mining and claims. And one unhappy party. I didn't ask.

"Yes, ma'am. Today's high will be minus fourteen."

"Celsius."

"Ç'est frette en esti." Translation: bloody cold. "I'm hearing reports of a wee squall down your way."

"The models are all over the map. As usual. Some suggest Inara could hit the Carolinas. Others have her heading west to Keokuk."

"Where's that?"

"Iowa."

"That's not true."

"It is. It's the southeasternmost city in the state."

Ryan ignored that. “Any chance Charlotte could be in the cross-hairs?”

“Highly unlikely.”

“It has happened.”

“It has.”

“How’s the Birdcat coping?”

“Poorly. Listen, Ryan, I appreciate you checking in, but I have to finish up an analysis involving a potential child endangerment. Maybe homicide.”

“Potential?”

“It’s complicated.”

“For years, I was a cop.”

“It said so right on your badge.” Referencing one of Ryan’s favorite new lines.

“It did.”

“OK.” I organized the basics in my head. “The victim lived here in North Carolina. Last week, she was found dead in her home. An autopsy showed no evidence of trauma, but toxicology testing revealed lethal blood alcohol levels.”

“Where were the parents?”

“Off sailing the Caribbean.”

“How old was the vic?”

“The detective zings straight to the core.”

“Former detective.”

“Right. The victim—her name is Tereza—came to the U.S. via a Bulgarian adoption agency in 2012. At the time, the parents were told she was seven years old. But they claim to have subsequently uncovered records listing Tereza’s date of birth as 2000, not 2005. That would make her twenty when she died, not fifteen.”

“An adult, not a minor.”

“Bingo.”

“So perfectly legal to be home alone. What’s the problem?”

“Tereza told everyone she was born in 2005. The agency insists that’s the case.”

“The kid had no friends?”

“She arrived in the States speaking no English, so the parents decided on homeschooling. Over the years, that arrangement continued because of behavioral issues. Not sure what those were.”

“So your vic had little contact with anyone outside the home.”

“Exactly. She was a very small person and, at the time of her death, was claiming to be a minor, dressing like a kid, acting like a kid. The parents say it was fraud from the outset and that Tereza was a sociopath who scammed them for years.”

“Let me guess. Some DA disagrees and is determined to prosecute.”

“Child abandonment, child endangerment, negligent homicide. Who knows what else? The parents’ attorney, a guy named Lloyd Thorn, insists his clients are guilty of nothing but kindness. He says they provided Tereza with a home free of charge. That they just couldn’t take her abusive behavior any longer.”

“So they did what?”

“Took a prolonged vacation, hoping she’d move out as they’d suggested. They figured she’d be fine on her own.”

“Where are they now?”

“Under arrest in Saint Croix. Thorn contacted me yesterday after he got access to X-rays taken when Tereza suffered some sort of fall last year.”

“Are the films useful?”

“Very. I have a theory, but I want to do a little more research before I talk to Thorn. He’s phoned me four times in the last two days. The guy’s very high-pressure.”

“And I know how you respond to bullies.”

“Keep that in mind, detective.”

“*Oui, madame.*”

“We could lose power anytime, so I want to wrap this up.”

“Conditions are that bad?”

“Electrical outages are SOP here.”

“Ring me in a couple of hours?”

“Sure.”

“Maybe talk dirty?”

“Goodbye, Ryan.”

After disconnecting, I verified several points online. Then I turned to my osteology and genetics textbooks.

Every now and then, I got up to peer out a window. Or to check back with our folksy weatherman. Each time, Medford’s eyebrow angle was slightly more acute.

I was doing one last round with the X-rays when something bulky skittered across the lawn and slammed a wall with a muted thud. The annex went dark.

And I was as certain as I’d ever be regarding Tereza.

Time for some serious battening.

Inspired by Medford’s second bullet point and Birdie’s instinctual choice of refuge, I dragged bedding into the annex’s most interior room, a windowless closet with a low, sloping ceiling wedged below the staircase. I added my mobile and laptop, a gallon of water, a box of granola bars, my current Karin Slaughter book, and Birdie’s food and drink bowls.

A quick sandwich by flashlight, a trip to the head, then I went in search of the cat. He was not enthused about being hauled out from under the bed.

The rain started as I was descending the stairs. No timid first wave of tentative drops, the deluge came all at once, full force and sideways, like water blasting from a high-pressure nozzle.

Easing my grip, I allowed the cat to catapult from my chest into the improvised storm cellar. He shot behind a row of stacked boxes, eyes like Frisbees, fur and tail in full upright mode, an odd mewling noise rising from his throat. I crawled in with him and closed the door.

“It’s OK, Bird. We’ve got plenty of food.”

Stretching out on my makeshift bed, I tried to relax. Eventually, the cat joined me and curled at my knee. I reached down to pet him. His entire body was trembling.

For the next several hours, Birdie and I listened to the cacophony of pounding rain and howling wind, muted but unmistakably wild. I wondered how extensive the damage would be. The cat's thoughts were undoubtedly traveling a different path.

At some point, I drifted off. Awoke to the sound of an exploding transformer.

Feeling the cat tense and resume shaking, I started to stroke him, slowly and gently. As my hand worked its magic, my thoughts looped back to my afternoon visitor.

Polly Beecroft and her sister, Harriet, were monozygotic twins, meaning they'd developed from a single fertilized egg that split early in embryonic development. Since the women shared identical DNA, they looked alike. No biggie. The chance of having identical twins is around three or four in every one thousand births.

I felt the tiniest easing of tension in Birdie's body. My touch was having the desired effect. Or he was running out of steam.

Polly's grandmother and her great-aunt were also identical twins, born in London in 1870. Polly had showed me a portrait of them, one named Sybil, the other Susanne Bouvier. They, too, had looked like clones of each other, and both had looked exactly like Polly and Harriet, born eight decades later.

Something shattered in the yard. Birdie's shaking kicked back into high. I decided to think out loud, adding my voice to the stroking, partly to benefit the cat, partly to block the bedlam outside.

"Susanne and Sybil traveled to Paris in 1888, and after a month in the city, Sybil vanished without a trace. To this day, no one knows what happened to her.

"Polly's grandmother, Susanne, went on to emigrate to the U.S., marry, and have children. Polly's mother was born in 1909. Polly and Harriet came along in 1948.

"Here's the strange part, Bird. In addition to Sybil's disappearance, of course. Polly also showed me a picture of a death mask."

Birdie rolled to his back. I took this as an indication of interest.

"Death masks were popular in the nineteenth century, before

people had cameras. They were kind of like ceramic selfies, created to help friends and family remember the deceased.”

I made that part up, but it sounded reasonable. Birdie didn’t question my explanation.

“Polly didn’t know where Harriet had gotten the photo. And she had no idea of the mask’s current whereabouts. Are you ready for this? The death mask in Polly’s picture looked exactly like her. Like all four women.” Added as if the cat needed clarification, “The features were the same as in both sets of twins.”

Bird stretched his forelimbs upward and let his paws drop, limp.

“So why did Polly come to see me, you ask? Excellent question. She wonders if the woman depicted in the death mask could be her great-aunt, Sybil. And if so, she wants to know if I can discover what happened to her.”

Out on the lawn, a tree snapped with a dull pop. I heard a crack far overhead, then something big ratcheted across the roof.

The cat scabbled for cover under the quilt.

We hunkered there the rest of the night, Birdie shivering, me wondering what devastation I would face in the morning.

Unaware that the storm damage would be nothing compared to that triggered by an upcoming call.

3

Wednesday, October 6

I awoke to pitch-black.

Groggy, I rose to a crouch and groped for the chain on the overhead fixture. Pulled. Nothing.

Great. Still no electricity.

Dropping back onto the improvised bed, I located my phone. The screen showed the time to be 6:22.

Morning?

I opened my hurricane-tracking app.

Inara had made landfall as a Cat 2 storm between Savannah and Charleston around nine the previous night. After a five-hour tantrum, she'd moved offshore and was now Virginia's problem.

Good news. Charlotte had caught only her western edge.

I opened the closet door. Pearl-gray light was seeping between the closed slats of the plantation shutters, throwing off-angle slashes onto the floor.

I crawled out into the hall. Birdie, ever cautious, remained huddled in the blankets.

Inside the annex, all was quiet. No humming refrigerator or

blowing AC. Outside, bird chatter high above and the staccato barking of a distant dog.

Using my iPhone for illumination, I made a quick tour of both floors. Save for a torn screen on one bedroom window, everything appeared to be intact.

Coffee was impossible, so I got a Diet Coke from the slumbering fridge, then crossed the kitchen. Despite much forceful shoving and shouldering, the back door wouldn't budge. Encountering no such impediment in front, I stepped out onto the stoop.

As is typical following hurricanes, the air seemed extraordinarily clear and crisp. The sky, slowly brightening, was unmarred by even the tiniest of clouds.

Sharon Hall looked as if a bomb had gone off. Trees were down, and debris and vegetation covered the grounds. Uprooted shrubs lay jumbled along the manor house foundation, and a trash can hung wedged between its pillars. Two concrete urns lay shattered on the porch, soil and begonias spewing from them like innards from a squashed roach.

Slowly, my neighbors began to emerge, hesitant but game, like survivors of some B-movie apocalypse. Most were already suited up for yard work. A few pushed wheelbarrows. Many carried garden tools.

I went inside, brushed my teeth, and changed into jeans and a sweatshirt. After locating a pair of old work gloves, I joined the recovery effort, doing my bit with a very questionable rake.

Shortly after nine, word spread that the power had been restored. I took a break to return to the annex to plug in my mobile. And to rejoice. I have to admit, I'm a huge fan of electricity.

Birdie had ventured forth, startled awake when the bare bulb in his haven lit up. He was calmer, but still needed two milligrams of something to restore him to normal.

I was heading back outside when my newly connected mobile warbled. The first of three calls that day. Not the one that would send my life off-kilter.

Recognizing the number, I steeled myself. Previous conversations had shown that—I'm being kind here—Lloyd Thorn lacked certain interpersonal skills.

“Good morning, Mr. Thorn.”

“I wasn't sure I'd get through. A real pisser, this storm.”

“We've just started to clean up the mess.”

“My clients are shitting their shorts waiting for your take.”

“I understand.”

“Don't misread me. Tereza's death is a freakin' tragedy. But my clients did nothing wrong. It's an outrage they're sitting in jail.”

“Please hold while I get my notes.”

Resuming the conversation, I placed Thorn on speaker. I could hear him fidgeting impatiently, probably clicking a ballpoint pen.

“I'm somewhat limited having never examined Tereza or viewed a photo of her. But I did spend several hours with the X-rays.”

“Let's cut to the chase.”

“In my opinion, Tereza at the time of her death was in her early to mid-twenties. I believe she had a condition called Silver-Russell syndrome, or SRS.”

“What's that?” The clicking stopped. Paper rustled.

“A congenital growth disorder tha—”

“I went to law school, not med school. For now, just the basics.”

“SRS can explain the stunted growth.”

“Stunted?”

“Children with SRS tend to have high foreheads, small jaws, and triangular faces. But those features become less obvious with age.”

“Uh-huh.”

“There's no specific radiological indicator of SRS. However, delayed bone age, clinodactyly, and fifth middle or distal phalangeal hypoplasia have been reported as suggestive of the syndrome.” Speaking über-slowly and purposely using medical jargon.

“What the hell's that mean?”

“They are features that can be seen on X-rays. Which is what I had to work with and which is objective evidence. Clinodactyly re-

fers to the abnormal curvature of a digit. Hypoplasia refers to the underdevelopment of a body part, in this case, of portions of the little finger.”

“Tereza had all that?”

“She did.”

“How’s this relevant?”

“It can explain her extremely short stature.”

“Short stature in adults?”

“Yes. Especially if growth abnormalities aren’t treated post-natally.”

“Like *that* would have happened in Bulgaria. How common is this SRS?”

“Stats put the occurrence somewhere between one in three thousand and one in one hundred thousand births.”

“That’s about as useful as a tit on a nun.”

Unable to disagree, I didn’t respond.

“You said congenital. This thing’s inherited?”

“Yes. But the genetics are unclear. Autosomal dominant, autosomal recessive, and X-linked inheritance models have been reported, but without going into—”

“Yeah, don’t.”

Having had my fill of Thorn’s abrasive manner, I did.

“It’s thought that loci—think genes—on chromosome eleven play a major role in SRS. But chromosome seven may also—”

“You’re saying Tereza was a dwarf because of wonky genes.”

“I wouldn’t put it in quite those words.” Wondering precisely where this jerk *did* go to law school.

“So she was an adult, not a kid. In her twenties.”

“Yes.”

“Not fuckin’ fifteen.”

Definitely not Harvard.

“You’re gonna put all this on paper?”

“I’ll send a full report.”

“When?”

“When it’s finished.”

“You know, one time this little psycho drowned the family puppy. Another time, she set fire to the house. I could go on.” Info added to spur me to quicker action? “Anyway, great stuff, doc. I’m gonna get this asshole prosecutor on the horn right now.”

I didn’t envy the hapless DA whose phone was about to ring.

Despite the gloves, I developed an epic assortment of blisters. At noon, I returned to the annex to treat them.

My mobile lay on the counter, fully charged at last. The little green icon showed one voice message. My best friend, Anne Turnip.

The second call of the day after Thorn’s. This one not the world-tilter, either.

I listened to the directive, delivered with typical Anne melodrama.

“Call me ASAP. Like, now! As soon as you hear this.”

A few words about my BFF.

Anne has emerald eyes and long blond hair, its color now maintained through the magic of chemistry. She is leggy-tall and, despite an aversion to exercise and all forms of sport, has remained as thin as the day we met. A very long time ago.

After downing a somewhat warm peach yogurt, I hit call back.

“Oh, God, Tempe! You’ve got to come!” Anne’s tone made Birdie seem tranquil in comparison.

“Where are you?”

“At the beach house. Now that the weenie boy-cop at the connector finally let me onto the island.” Vowels reflecting her Alabama birth and Mississippi schooling, broadened further by the moment’s indignation. “You wouldn’t believe the Gestapo—”

“How does it look?”

“Devastated! I need help!”

“Take a deep breath.”

Long pause. Then, “Right. You’re absolutely right. I’m sounding eighty-proof bonkers.”

“The house is still standing?”

“Yes.”

“Your roof is still on?”

“Most of it.”

“The roads are open?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have power?”

“Not yet. Jesus, Lord, nothing’s working. The damn commode won’t flush!”

“It’ll flush. The seat just won’t light up. Besides, you have six others.”

“I can’t charge the car. I’m trapped here!”

Sounded similar to my morning. Except for the TOTO toilet and the Tesla.

“Where is TT?” I asked.

“Who the flipping flamingo knows?”

For years, Anne was married to an attorney named Tom Turnip. Decades back, when Tom was a second-year associate, a senior partner at his firm addressed him as Ted for an entire month. We’d called him Tom-Ted ever since. TT.

The marriage eventually ended. Long, unoriginal story. Anne walked away with a handsome settlement, including property at the Isle of Palms, South Carolina, known as IOP. Despite the financial spanking, she and TT remain friends. With benefits. Apparently, post-storm restoration was not among them.

“Anne, I can’t—”

“They’ve reversed the eastbound lanes on I-26 back to normal. You won’t have any problem getting here.”

“It’s not that.”

“Did you have much damage at your place?”

“No. But—”

“Are you working on any *humongous* cases?”

“No. But—”

“If your boss needs you, Charlotte is just three hours away.”

She had me there. And were the situation reversed, I knew Anne would drop everything to rush to my aid. She had in the past. More than once.

I looked at the clock.

“Fine.” Unnecessarily dramatic sigh. “It’ll take me at least an hour to secure the annex and pack a few things.”

“Hallelujah, Harry! The kitchen’s intact so I’ll mix us a whole passel of drinks with those little paper umbrellas in ’em. Virgin for you, of course. Thank God, I’ve got Fritos in the pantry.”

I promised an infusion of provisions and disconnected.

Turning, I saw Birdie watching me intently.

“Ready for a road trip?”

Totally noncommittal stare.

A quick call to Nguyen, minimal packing, a go at the tree limb jamming the back door, then we were off.

Driving across town was an experience I don’t wish to repeat. Broken branches and downed trees littered the streets, requiring U-turns and rerouting at several points. Traffic lights were malfunctioning at many intersections, forcing drivers to figure things out for themselves. Some were better at that than others.

Normally, it’s twenty minutes from the annex to I-77. That morning, it took sixty. With Birdie yowling the whole way.

Three hours after leaving Charlotte, I’d exited I-26 and gone several miles along I-526 when my phone rang for the third time that day. Area code 843.

The call that would send my life off-kilter for weeks and alter my worldview forever.

“Temperance Brennan.” I answered, using speakerphone.

“Dr. Brennan. My name is Ebony Herrin.” The voice was grav-

elly, neither high nor low. Based on pitch and cadence, I thought the caller might be black and male. Wasn't sure on either. "I'm the newly elected Charleston County coroner."

"How can I help you, Dr. Herrin?"

"No need for titles. I'm an RN."

"How can I be of help?" Sir? Madam?

"I called your office in Charlotte, got forwarded to Dr. Nguyen. She told me you were heading to Charleston."

A little backstory.

With one short and unpleasant hiatus, I've served for decades as forensic anthropologist for the Mecklenburg County Medical Examiner in Charlotte, North Carolina. The MCME is the decoder of death for the region, and I'm the specialist who analyzes remains unfit for a pathologist's scalpel: the decomposed, dismembered, burned, mummified, mutilated, and skeletal.

Throughout my career, my boss was Dr. Tim Larabee, a brilliant pathologist, amateur marathoner, and all-around good guy. Larabee ran the office until a hopped-up junkie took him out with two bullets to the gut in a mindless mugging.

After Larabee's murder, Dr. Margot Heavner was hired. In her spare time, the new chief authored tell-all books on forensics that earned her the label Dr. Morgue. To boost sales, Dr. Morgue appeared on any media platform that would have her and sensationalized her work. I didn't like many of her comments. And said so. As a result, there was history between us.

Case in point. I publicly criticized Heavner for a series of interviews she did with a tinfoil-hat blogger and conspiracy theorist named Nick Body. Heavner was incensed. And held a grudge. Thus, the hiatus. During Dr. Morgue's tenure, I was exiled from the MCME.

Fortunately, that tenure was short. Within months of assuming her duties, Heavner was exposed as corrupt and forced to resign in disgrace. Dr. Samantha Nguyen was chosen as her replacement.

Unlike Heavner, Nguyen had no trouble directing outside callers to me.

“Yes.” Tires humming as I rolled across the bridge spanning the Wando River. Glancing south, I saw the quayside cranes at the Wando harbor, dark and bony against the pinks and yellows of the fading day.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, we’ve had no resident forensic anthropologist in South Carolina for many years. But I noted from old reports that you’ve done consults for my predecessor.”

“Yes.” Wary.

“I have a situation that requires your expertise.”

“I’m listening.” Not wanting to.

“Last night’s hurricane tossed a container ashore down near the battery. I won’t burden you with details on the phone, but a couple of kayakers found the thing early this morning, pried off the lid, and spotted what they thought was a body. They called the cops, the cops called me.

“My investigator collected the container and transported it to the MUSC morgue. There are actually two people inside. Just eyeballing the bulk, it looks to be one adult and one kid.”

“Any possibility of visual IDs?” Seriously, Brennan? If that were the case, why would Herrin be contacting you?

“The amount of mass tells me decomp will be too advanced.”

“Any personal effects, clothing, jewelry, et cetera?”

“Both bodies were wrapped in plastic sheeting secured with electrical wire. I didn’t want to do too much poking around, but I peeled back enough to see that at least the one is nude.”

From nowhere, a flashback image. A woman. A child. A plastic container washed from the sea.

My gut clenched, and my mouth went dry.

I swallowed.

“Any clues to cause of death?”

“I caught a better glimpse of the one body, because of the kids pulling on the wrapping and me tugging it a bit more. Looks to be a single bullet to the head. Also, the fingers and teeth are gone.”

It can’t be.

“You’ll need a pathologist.” Sounding calmer than I felt.

“I like a guy named Klopp. I’ve left him a message suggesting y’all meet at the hospital tomorrow. I’ll text you the time he’s available.”

“Fine.”

“A detective named Vislosky came to the scene. Not sure about her stomach for autopsies.” A brief pause, then, “Tell me what you need.”

I did, and we disconnected.

Moments later, I crossed the bridge connecting Mount Pleasant to the Isle of Palms. Salt marsh stretched to the horizon on both sides, tranquil and still. Here and there, I saw a wink of white, an ibis or egret, fading into shadow along with the spartina grass in which it stood.

I turned onto Palm Boulevard, a single phrase ricocheting in my head, a mantra born of foreboding.

It can't be.

It can't be.