

COLD,
COLD
BONES

1

It began with an eyeball.

The pupil was wide as a Texas prairie, the iris the color of faded denim. Crimson vessels spiderwebbed the yellow-white sclera.

More on that later.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 30

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

“I’ve got this.” Despite the cold and damp, my palms were sweaty. My everything was sweaty.

The carton slipped from my hands as the words left my mouth.

Thunk!

“Damn.”

Sighing in irritation, Katy set down a lamp, a peculiar Alice-in-Wonderland arrangement with a long, crooked neck.

“Did you notice the word on top?” Assuming I hadn’t, she spelled it out. “B.O.O.K.S. What do you suppose that means, Mom?” We’d been at this for hours and, in addition to clammy, we were exhausted and sick of the whole bloody thing. And cranky as hell.

“The box contains books.” Terse.

“And what is one property of a box of books?” Lips barely moving.

I said nothing.

“They’re heavy!”

“Let’s break for lunch.”

“Let’s.”

We hopped from the back of the truck. Grabbing the lamp, Katy crossed a small patch of winter-dead lawn fronting a mid-century brick bungalow whose entrance was standing wide. I followed her inside, for the zillionth time that day, and closed the bright red door behind me.

As Katy climbed the stairs with Alice’s curious illuminator, I continued down the hallway to the kitchen. Which, given the home’s aged exterior, was astonishingly state of the art. Marble countertops, College of Surgeons–level lighting, built-in coffee extravaganza, adult beverage center, top-of-the-line stainless-steel appliances.

Crossing to a Sub-Zero refrigerator the size of a boxcar, I withdrew two cans of cream soda and placed them on the island beside a white takeout bag. I was adding paper towel napkins for flair when Katy reappeared.

Seeing the bag, she beamed. “Please tell me you hit the Rhino.”

“I hit the Rhino,” I said. “Got your deli favorite?”

“The Stacked High?”

“Yes, ma’am. A Sicilian for me. Cold.”

Hands washed, we unwrapped our sandwiches and popped open the sodas. Were messily chewing when Katy asked, “How’s your back?”

“Dandy.” Though my lumbar was registering displeasure with the morning’s activities.

“You really should leave the heavy stuff for me.”

“Because I’m a nerd scientist and you’re a badass combat veteran?”

“Was.”

“Hallelujah!”

“What? You didn’t approve of me serving my country?”

“I approved of your service. I hated that much of it was done in a war zone.”

“That’s generally what serving your country is all about.”

Following a post-college period of, I’ll be kind and call it “uncertainty,” my naive and reckless daughter went full circle and answered Uncle Sam’s call. Awesome, I told myself. She’ll find direction. Self-discipline. Being female, she’ll be in no peril. Sure, my attitude was sexist. But this was my twentysomething golden-haired child who was boarding a bus for boot camp.

Then the regs changed to allow women in the trenches. En masse, the ladies shouldered their M16s and marched off to fight alongside their brothers-in-arms.

Following basic combat training, the golden-haired child chose her occupational specialty, 11B. Infantryman. Katy’s time in uniform re-introduced me to military acronyms and jargon I hadn’t heard since my ex, Pete, was a Marine.

In a nanosecond, or so it seemed to me, Katy was deployed to Afghanistan to join a brigade combat team. Not so awesome. Lots of anxious days and sleepless nights. But her tour went well, and twelve months later she returned home with only a small scar on one cheek.

Life in the field artillery agreed with my daughter. When her enlistment ended, to my dismay, she re-upped. To my greater dismay, she signed on for another Middle East deployment. Hello darkness, my old friend.

All that was past, now. The tossing and turning was over. Well, mostly.

Last fall, Katy had decided to hang up her boots and camos and return to civilian life. She was honorably discharged and, to my surprise and delight, decided to settle in Charlotte. At least for a while. Why? She won’t say.

Katy also refuses to talk about her time in the army. Her friends. Her overseas duty. The scar. So, we’re playing it like her former employer: don’t ask, don’t tell.

We ate in companionable silence for a while. Katy broke it.

“Is the nerd scientist currently working on any rad bones?”

“A few.”

Katy curled her fingers in a give-me-more gesture. They were coated with shimmery creole mustard.

“Last week a barn in Kannapolis burned to the ground. When the rubble cooled, firefighters found the remains of two horses and one adult male, all charred beyond recognition.”

“Shitty deal for the horses.”

“Shitty deal for everyone.”

“Let me guess. Farmer Fred was a smoker.”

“The body wasn’t that of the property owner.”

“Did you ID the guy?”

“I’m working on it.”

“The horses?”

“Chuckie and Cupcake.”

“Were they valuable?”

“No.”

“Weird.”

“What’s weirder is that the man had a bullet hole right between his eyes.”

“Whoa. Someone went kinetic.”

Katy fell quiet again, thinking about bullet holes, maybe horses. Or creole mustard.

I am a forensic anthropologist. I consult to coroners and medical examiners needing help with corpses unfit for standard autopsy—the decomposed, dismembered, burned, mutilated, mummified, and skeletal. I help recover those with the misfortune to die away from home or a hospital bed. I give names to the nameless. I document postmortem interval and body treatment. I consider manner of death, be it by suicide, homicide, accident, or natural causes.

Mine was not the job of any parent Katy encountered growing up. But she was good with my being different, and in her teens began asking questions. Some things I shared, others I didn’t. *Many* others.

In my experience the world divides into two camps: those fascinated by my profession and those repelled by it. Katy, never squeamish, has always been a member of Camp Fascination.

I glanced up. Katy's eyes were looking past me, focused on a point elsewhere in the room. Elsewhere in time? I didn't ask what she was thinking. Waited until she spoke again.

"What's the sitrep with *Monsieur le détective*?"

"Sitrep?"

"Situation report."

My daughter was asking about Lieutenant-détective Andrew Ryan, a former Sûreté du Québec homicide cop with whom I currently was living. In Montreal and Charlotte. *C'est compliqué*.

"Ryan?" I asked.

"No. Inspector Clouseau," she said, rolling her very green eyes.

"We're good."

"*That* sounds convincing."

"Really. Ryan was here at Christmas. You two just missed each other."

"He's retired, right? Working as a PI?"

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"On a case in Saint Martin."

"Tough duty."

"The guy blisters if he even looks at a beach. Canadian skin, you know."

"He's gone a lot?"

"He is."

"What's he privately investigating?" she asked, hooking air quotes.

"It has to do with a grounded sailboat and an insurance claim."

"Sounds boring."

"Many of his cases are."

I took another bite of my sandwich, blotted red wine vinegar from the front of my tee. Stole a peek at Katy. She'd asked about *my* love life. What the hell?

“So.” Casual as a Sunday stroll on a boardwalk. “Any romance in your life?”

Katy gave what some might call a guffaw. I’ve never been clear on how one sounds.

“*Ro*-mance? Did you really use the word ‘*ro*-mance’? Like, do I have a suitor? A sweetheart? A beau?”

“People still say romance.”

“People over eighty.”

“What about—”

“Let it go.”

Katy’s altered tone triggered a warning. But we’d been joking. Hadn’t we?

I was about to change the subject, when Katy’s eyes narrowed in a way I didn’t like.

“I’ve been in the army for eight years, Mom. I’ve been to war. I’ve seen people with their limbs blown off, their heads shattered, their organs spread around them as they bled out. I’ve seen little kids die. The last thing I believe in is romance.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” I said, unsure how I had. But I think you’re getting the picture. My daughter came home touchy and I was treading softly.

Katy leaned back and ran both hands down her face. “Sorry. I’m just tired from this friggin’ move.”

“It’s amazing how much a small truck can hold,” I said lightly.

Katy raised a palm toward me. Despite the greasy yellow coating, I high-fived it.

“Let’s wrap this bastard up,” she said.

“Let’s do,” I agreed.

We bunched our wrappers and stuffed them into the bag, and were heading down the hall when Katy asked,

“Have you ever met one?”

I was lost. “One what?”

“A cold Sicilian.”

I could think of no response.

“I’ve dated two,” she said. “Each was hotter than a steak on a grid-dle.”

I definitely didn’t follow up on that.

The remaining boxes and household items took more than three hours. One oversized chair almost didn’t make the cut. With a lot of cursing and maneuvering, and a little muscle from a sketchy-looking guy passing by on the sidewalk, we finally managed to force the thing through the door.

Since we looked and smelled like escapees from some subterranean chamber, dining out wasn’t an option. Having no idea of the location of her soap and towels, Katy accepted my invitation to clean up and eat dinner at my home, called “the annex,” but insisted on sleeping in her new digs.

Remembering my first apartment with its mattress on the floor and Salvation Army Papa-san chair, I understood and didn’t try to dissuade her. She’d hang back to lock up and follow in her own car.

Long before the era of zip codes, the fine citizens of Charlotte loved to distinguish the sectors making up their town. Each area was endowed with a name and set of stories. Plaza-Midwood. Tryon Hills. Eastover. Dilworth. Cherry. Perhaps this practice wasn’t always for the purest of reasons. Nevertheless, old ways die hard. As the city grew and new developments appeared or old areas gentrified, the new neighborhoods were also tagged with catchy, realtor-friendly labels. NoDa. South End. Piper Glen. Ballantyne.

Katy’s house was in Elizabeth, an older section composed of a hodgepodge of bungalows trimmed with expansive front porches and interspersed with enormous brick mansions, and high-priced condos resulting from the demolition of the quaint but outdated. Mature pines, willow oaks, and magnolias shade the here-and-there charmingly root-buckled sidewalks.

But Elizabeth isn’t strictly residential. The hood’s main drag is

home to the Visulite, the city's first movie theater, recently converted to a live-music venue. Its streets host a suitably eclectic collection of restaurants, bars, boutiques, and food trucks frequented by the well-to-do and the barely doing.

No description of Elizabeth appears without the word *trendy* or *hip*. It's that combo of soccer practice and carpool by day/partying and merrymaking by night—plus a location just a bump east of uptown—that accounts for the area's appeal to young professionals.

Point of information. Some Charlotteans say uptown, others prefer downtown. Positions on the issue are unshakable and have nothing to do with geography.

I live in Myers Park, another bump out from the city center. Its shaded streets boast a mix of old Georgians and Colonials elbow-to-elbow with new Italianate, Neo-classical, and brutalist monstrosities resulting from the replacement of knockdowns on undersized lots. Meticulously manicured lawns all around.

Myers Park has a price point only slightly higher than Elizabeth, but its residents tend to lean conservative. More lawyers and bankers, fewer artists and poets.

The drive took all of ten minutes. It was dark by the time I pulled onto the circle drive at Sharon Hall.

A word about my home, which is somewhat unconventional.

Sharon Hall is a nineteenth-century manor-turned-condo-complex lying a spit from the Queens University campus. My little outbuilding is called the annex. Annex to what? No one knows. The diminutive two-story structure appears on none of the estate's original plans. The big house is there. The coach house. The herb and formal gardens. No annex. Clearly the little outbuilding was an unimportant add-on.

I once sought the help of an architectural historian at UNCC. She dug but failed to learn anything useful. Kiln? Tackle shed? Smokehouse? She had other suggestions that I've forgotten. I don't really care. Barely twelve hundred square feet, the arrangement suits my

needs. Bedroom and bath up. Kitchen, dining room, parlor, and study down.

I rented the annex when my marriage to Pete imploded, and, eventually, I bought the place. Made no changes until the past year. Then, major renovation. The Ryan story. Later.

Arriving home, I let myself in and set my purse on the counter. Called out to Birdie. No cat appeared.

Not up to dealing with a feline snit, I climbed to the second floor, stripped, and took a very long, very hot shower. When I emerged, smelling of goats' milk and chai body wash, the cat was regarding me from atop the vanity, round yellow eyes filled with reproach.

"I know. I was gone longer than anticipated. It couldn't be helped."

No response.

"You wouldn't believe how much stuff she had." Jesus. I was apologizing to a cat.

Birdie hopped to the floor and exited without comment.

"Whatever," I said to the haughtily elevated tail.

I was pulling on sweats when a voice called up the stairs. "I'm here."

"Coming right down."

Katy was standing in the kitchen, face tense.

"There's a box on your doorstep."

"No," I said, laughing. "Not another box."

I stepped outside and scooped up the package.

"Who's it from?" Katy's voice sounded odd.

"No idea."

"Is there a return address?"

I shook my head no.

"Were you expecting something?" Back rigid, Katy maintained her distance from me. From the thing in my hands?

Suspecting that the unexplained parcel was the source of my daughter's uneasiness, I set it on the counter, got a Heineken from the fridge, and handed the beer to her.

“Chill,” I said, wary of whatever dark memory had been triggered. And wanting to calm her. “I get lots of deliveries. Half the time I’ve forgotten what I ordered.”

Digging a box cutter from a drawer, I cut the brown paper, then sliced through the tape. After laying back the flaps, I peered inside.

My breath caught in my throat.

My hand flew to my mouth.