

The background of the book cover features a dark, atmospheric scene. At the top, a pale, circular moon hangs in a sky with a gradient of orange and red, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. Below the sky, a dense field of tall, thin grasses or reeds is silhouetted against the light. The bottom portion of the cover is dominated by a close-up, dark image of several human skulls and bones, some of which are partially buried in the ground, creating a somber and macabre visual.

JEN J. DANNA
WITH ANN VANDERLAAN

Dead, Without
a Stone to Tell It

CHAPTER ONE: MARSH WREN NEST

Marsh Wren Nest: a hollow, ball-shaped structure woven from marsh grass and sedges by the short-billed marsh wren (*Cistothorus platensis*); it is attached to the stems of marsh grasses a few feet above the high water mark.

Monday, 10:57 A.M.

The Old North Church

Boston, Massachusetts

The heels of the woman's boots rapped sharply against worn wood as she descended the centuries-old staircase. Not many ventured from the sun-streaked upper reaches of the church into the oppressive stillness of the dark, damp basement below. Only those who would commune with the dead.

She was one of those people.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, the large area under the church sanctuary spreading before her. Through the doorway opposite, a long corridor stretched away into the gloom that shaded the far reaches of the space, dimly lit by the few exposed light bulbs that hung from the ceiling. There, long held safe in the quiet darkness and forgotten by all but a scarce few, were the oldest crypts in Boston.

Standing in the nearly silent basement, with only the creaks from the floorboards overhead betraying the presence of the funeral mourners, the centuries of history entombed in this

building surrounded her, just like the dead sleeping inside the aged brick walls.

The vicar's words rang in her head. *I'm sorry I can't take you down, but the funeral is about to start. You'll find him if you go down the stairs and turn right into the columbarium.*

The atmosphere changed the moment she stepped over the threshold. The basement and the crypts were cold and damp, but even surrounded by walls of modern burial niches, the columbarium seemed warm and inviting. A space where the living could feel closer to the dead who had gone before them.

Mournful music filtered through the floorboards into this quiet room of remembrance.

It felt . . . peaceful.

The peace was abruptly shattered by the clatter of something solid falling to the floor followed by a soft curse.

There he is.

On the far side of the room, a door opened into a small chamber. A doorway was cut into one of the whitewashed chamber walls, bright russet clay revealed at the entrance. Moving to stand in the gap, she looked into the tomb, staring in shock at the chaos within while breathing air musty with centuries of undisturbed stillness.

Rotting wooden boxes of different shapes and sizes were stacked haphazardly along the walls. Many of the boxes had collapsed, their lids loosened and their contents spilled out over other boxes and across the floor. Bones of every size and description lay in tangled piles, mixed with funeral ornaments and remnants of moldering cloth. A solitary skull grinned up at her from where it lay tipped against the cracked side of a crumpled box.

A movement to her left drew her attention and her gaze shifted to the man kneeling with his back partially turned to her. He bent over the pile of debris, freeing a single bone before

transferring it carefully in his gloved hands to a clear plastic tub on the floor beside him.

The small ball of tangled nerves in her stomach clenched tighter. So much was riding on this case and she had so much to prove—

She jerked her thoughts back into the present. *That's water under the bridge now. You have to do this right. And to succeed, you need him.*

Her eyes sharply assessed the man kneeling before her. *Mid-thirties, medium build, about 190 pounds, brown hair.*

What surprised her most was how much he'd changed since her single encounter with him years before. In her memory, while tall, he had a slight build, like a man who spent all his time with his nose in a book or bent over bones in the lab.

Not anymore.

He'd filled out considerably in the intervening years. His hunter green, crew-necked shirt stretched taut across his wide shoulders and muscled back as he bent over his work, and his biceps stretched and bunched as he picked up another bone.

As he placed the bone into the container, his overlong hair fell over his eyes. He raised a latex-gloved hand and pushed it back with his wrist.

For a brief moment, the scar was revealed by the bright spotlight—a thick furrow of twisted skin that started on his temple near his right eyebrow and disappeared into his hairline. Leigh stared at it in surprise—how had she missed it before? Whatever caused that scar had struck dangerously close to home. Any closer, he wouldn't be kneeling in a dusty church basement, and she wouldn't be here asking for his help.

She must have made a tiny involuntary sound because he suddenly twisted to face her. His hazel eyes widened in surprise as they met hers, and he gave a small jerk of his head, sending his hair tumbling back over his forehead.

“Dr. Lowell?” Her words seemed jarringly loud in the silence.

His gaze slid down her body. Unlike many men, his stare wasn’t predatory; rather it was a critical examination, as if cataloging her features. “I’m Matthew Lowell.” He rolled to his feet, pulling himself up to stand several inches taller than she.

He’s aged well, she thought. The only signs were the tiny lines around his eyes that gave his face character.

She pulled back the edge of her jacket to reveal a gold shield, bright against the black leather oval. “Trooper First Class Leigh Abbott, Massachusetts State Police, out of the Essex Detective Unit.”

His face clouded with confusion. “Essex? I haven’t been up there for probably two or three years.”

“Essex is my jurisdiction, but it’s what you can do here in Boston that interests me. When I was told you were out in the field, I asked whomever I talked to at the university to let you know I was coming.”

His expression grew wary. “I guess the message never made it through.” Planting his feet firmly, he crossed his arms over his chest. “What is it you think I can do for you?”

Leigh noted his sudden move to a defensive posture with a small spurt of alarm. “I’m looking to consult with a forensic anthropologist on a case. I would like to retain your services for—”

“No thanks. Not interested.”

Leigh drew up short, staring at him in stunned disbelief, dread starting to slowly pool in her stomach. This wasn’t the easygoing professor she remembered. “You haven’t even heard my proposal, Dr. Lowell. How can you make that decision?”

“I don’t need to hear it. The answer is ‘no.’ ”

Anger started to build, swamping the dread. She forced herself to calm down and try a different tack. “I’m familiar with your skills and you’re exactly what I need to help me solve this

case. If you'll just let me explain—"

"Don't bother. I've worked with you before. I don't need to hear the details."

Leigh stepped closer, drawing herself up to her full height. This was familiar ground; she worked with bigger egos than his on a daily basis in her own department. "I can assure you, Dr. Lowell, we have *never* worked together."

He didn't retreat. Instead, he simply stared down at her from only inches away. "Not you personally, Trooper. Your kind." His tone was thick with disdain.

"My *kind*? Do you mean women? Or cops?"

"Cops. You come in, you make demands, and you expect results. You don't care how, or why, you just want answers and you want them *now*. And you're willing to bully and threaten to get them. So . . . no thanks." He pushed past her, carefully skirting the debris on the floor and stepping back into the small prep area.

Leigh followed him, her eyes narrowed on his stony profile. She had one last weapon in her arsenal and she wasn't above using it—his own words from years ago, overheard as he spoke to a Boston detective after class: *If you think Sharpe is the expert, then you deal with him. Personally, I don't like his style and I have serious doubts about his methods and some of his conclusions. I wouldn't send a student I disliked to work with him.* "Thank you for your time, Dr. Lowell," she said with stiff formality. Turning away, she paused in the doorway to speak into the empty columbarium beyond. "You're clearly a very busy man, so I'll take my request to Dr. Sharpe at Harvard. He may be interested in a case like this. I'm told he likes—"

"Wait." The single word was clipped short with banked irritation.

Standing with her back to him, Leigh allowed a very brief smile of triumph to curve her lips. *Gotcha, you arrogant bastard.*

But when she turned back to face him, her features were schooled into polite interest. “Yes?”

She glimpsed the battle warring within him by the way the muscles in his jaw bunched and his hazel eyes simmered with frustration. When he spoke, his voice was resigned. “What is it you need, Trooper Abbott?”

Relief flooded through Leigh. “I have a bone I need examined.”

“A bone?” His dark brows drew together. “Singular?”

“Singular,” she confirmed. “It was found by a man out walking his dog near the town of Essex. The dog ran off and the owner caught up with it at a beaver pond. That’s when he noticed the bone protruding from the dam.”

“It was *in* the dam?”

“Yes. The beaver built it right into the dam. Having only one bone tells us nothing except that there’s a body. Dr. Edward Rowe, Medical Examiner for the State of Massachusetts, has declined the case at this point due to the lack of evidence recovered at the scene. But he suggested having a forensic anthropologist take a look to see if anything could be learned from examining the bone itself.”

“I know who Rowe is. Why doesn’t he use his own anthropologist for this?”

“He doesn’t have one anymore,” Leigh said. “Budget cuts. The person who used to be on staff took a position out of state, so we need a new consultant on a case-by-case basis. One with the appropriate qualifications to serve as an expert witness in court if the case comes to trial.”

“I’ve worked at two body farms during my training and have run my own lab for years. It’s my reputation on the line if I give faulty testimony in court, so I wouldn’t do this if my qualifications, knowledge, and experience didn’t stand up. But you

already know they will or you wouldn't be here in the first place." His eyes narrowed on her in speculation. "Why me?"

"Sorry?"

"Why did you come to me? There are other forensic anthropologists in the area. Trevor Sharpe, as you noted, being one."

"You taught one of the murder school classes I took."

" 'Murder school'?" He looked vaguely confused.

"That's what we call the course troopers take when they transfer from Field Services to the Detective Unit. You taught my class on skeletal recovery and identification." He scanned her face as if searching for some memory of her features. She gave him a twisted smile at the lack of recognition in his eyes, pushing away the small twinge of pain at being overlooked by the men in her professional life once again. "I guess I'm not that memorable."

He flushed slightly. "I teach a lot of students, so I don't always remember someone in particular unless I've had some personal interaction with them."

"To be fair, it was about three years ago and there were a lot of us in the class. I'd have been impressed if you'd remembered my face out of all those strangers."

"If it was three years ago, I was also brand-new on campus, so everyone was a stranger." He pushed back his sleeve to check the time. "I can meet you at my lab at one o'clock to examine your bone. I need to close down the site for the day since I might not be back this afternoon."

"That will be your call depending on what the evidence tells you." Leigh moved past him to stand in the doorway of the tomb. The smell of mustiness and disuse struck her again, as well as the shock of so many remains in such a small space. Her gaze traveled over the contents, picking out small details: ivory bones, scattered and piled haphazardly; a narrow, plain gold band winking dully in the light; a small bottle-green medicine

vial lying on its side; a bonnet, so tiny it could only belong to a child.

A shiver ran up her spine. So many dead, reduced to nothing but bones, their most precious possessions now simply a few misplaced trinkets. Unbidden, her mind flashed to her father, dead now four years. What would be left of him? A rib cage with his police force Medal of Honor pinned to a rotting uniform, or his shield lying atop a pile of dry, splintered bones? She closed her eyes briefly on a sudden wave of grief; she simply couldn't bear to think of that dynamic, vibrant man reduced to so little.

"It's kind of a mess, isn't it?" Lowell brushed against her back as he came to stand behind her, and suddenly the cold mustiness of the tomb was overlaid with warm hints of citrus and sandalwood. "But out of chaos comes order. That's my job. To sort through the remains in this charnel house and to reassemble the dead. To identify them. And, if possible, to return their grave goods to them."

"What do you do with the remains once they're identified?"

"We bring them home."

Startled, Leigh swiveled to look at him sharply. He'd unconsciously echoed her own feelings about the victims she stood over so often. Some had faces and identities, but for those without, it was a constant struggle to unite the dead with their families and to give the survivors both closure and justice. It struck her abruptly that they shared a similar goal. The only difference between them was simply how long the dead in their care had been lost.

"We contact the families if we can track them down. We haven't found a family yet that didn't want their long-lost relatives back." He moved away to step back into the prep room.

Leigh started toward the doorway as Lowell snapped off the bright spotlights and made some final notes in the notebook on

the small table. But as she stepped into the columbarium, her head jerked up as his earlier words finally sank in. “Hold on, did you say that you wanted to examine the bone *in your lab?*”

Lowell set the book down and neatly laid the pen on its smooth burgundy surface. “Sure. I’ll be able to tell you more there and—”

She cut him off with a raised hand. “The sample needs to be examined and then stored in the M.E.’s lab space. That’s protocol.”

Irritation flitted over Lowell’s face. “I really need to examine it in my lab. All the equipment I’ll need is there.”

“We can’t do that. Legal chain of evidence requires that it be maintained in a secure location. You’ll have to work at the M.E.’s facility. Trust me, it’s the best the state has to offer. If you’re missing something, you can just bring it in. No one will mind.”

His jaw tightened. “That’s not the best way to do this. Do you want accurate answers or not? If so, we need to do it my way.”

Leigh felt their brief connection evaporate. “Are you always this stubborn? Do you always have to get your way or you just pick up your ball and go home?”

Irritation segued smoothly into temper. “Let’s get one thing straight, Trooper Abbott. If you want my help, you’ll have to give me some leeway. I’m taking time away from my own research. If you want to make it easier for me to do so, then you have to meet me halfway. If not, I’m out and you can ask Dr. Sharpe for help.”

She refrained from snapping at him by taking a deep breath while she weighed his response. *Stuck between a rock and a hard place. You have nothing to base this case on without him. If Sharpe’s not trustworthy, then Lowell’s your only choice.* “Then let me make this crystal clear, Dr. Lowell. If we’re going to break protocol

and use your lab instead of the state facilities, then you have to guarantee me a credible chain of evidence and complete security at your site.”

“Chain of evidence is no problem. And we’re just across the road from the M.E.’s office so if something needs to be stored there long term after we’ve examined it in the lab, we can easily move it. Our building has both security in the lobby and keycard-only access, but if that’s not good enough for you, then you can arrange for additional security with campus police. I’m going to be busy with your remains. *You* can take care of security.”

They stubbornly stood toe-to-toe until Leigh forced herself to take a step back. “Fine. But until it’s set up, I stay with the remains.”

“Fine,” he snapped back. “One other thing. Me and my lab includes my grad students. We’re a team and they’ll be helping on this.” Leigh opened her mouth but Lowell held up an index finger an inch from her lips. “That’s the deal. I’m a teacher and there’s no better way for them to learn than through hands-on experience. Trust me when I say that you’ll be glad to have them. Each one brings something of value to the table.”

Leigh nearly ground her teeth in frustration. “All right. In return, I want access to your lab at my convenience and that means starting now. If we’re meeting in the middle, then you have to come halfway.”

“We’ll do our best, but some of us do have prior commitments.”

“This could be murder, Dr. Lowell. That takes priority.”

“It could also be a hiker lost in the woods who died from an accidental fall. Murder remains to be seen. But,” he conceded, “if it’s murder, then, yes, it takes priority.”

“Then we need to determine what we’re dealing with.”

“Agreed. Give me time to gather my students and we’ll meet

you at one o'clock." He rattled off a south Boston address. "We're in room ten-seventeen. Bring maps of the area where the bone was found and the bone itself. Then we'll see what we can do for you, Trooper Abbott."

"Very well, Dr. Lowell." She turned sharply and strode from the columbarium, quickly climbing the vestry steps to re-emerge into the light.

He's on board. He may be a stubborn son of a bitch, but he's on board. Now to see what he and his team can do.

She reached for her cell phone to report in with her sergeant.

Matt listened to the hollow thud of her footsteps as she climbed the wooden staircase, followed by the sound of the door slamming behind her.

"Damn it!" He blew out a heavy breath and ran a hand through his hair.

Very smooth, Matt. The lady comes looking for help and first you refuse, then you snarl at her when she tries to follow protocol. Well done.

With a muttered curse, he sprang for the stairs, taking them two at a time. At the top of the staircase, he pushed through the fire door and burst into the Third Lantern Garden, a peaceful oasis of sprawling, sun-splashed flowers and shrubs surrounding a redbrick patio.

She had already climbed the garden steps and was briskly striding toward the front of the church. "Trooper Abbott," he called, his eyes narrowing on her retreating form when she ignored him. "Trooper!"

She turned around and he saw the phone pressed to her ear. She held up a finger, signaling him to wait. He wandered to the far side of the small garden and sat down on the wall of the gurgling circular fountain that graced one corner.

As he waited, Matt found himself staring at the woman stand-

ing at the top of the steps, taking in the honey-colored hair coiled neatly at the nape of her neck, crisp white shirt, and conservative charcoal-gray blazer and tailored pants. She was slim but the lines under her clothes spoke of a sleek, muscular build. The only jewelry she wore was a pair of discreet gold studs and a simple dial watch on a plain leather strap.

She dresses like a man and ties her hair back to downplay her looks. His eyes passed over her again and since she was partially turned away, he allowed his gaze to linger appreciatively on the curves she tried to hide. *Is it expected in her profession . . . or is she purposely trying not to stand out?*

A gust of wind ruffled his hair and metallic musical chimes shivered through the air. He recognized the sound as the breeze blowing through the thousands of dog tags suspended in the Memorial Garden at the back of the church, a memorial dedicated to the men and women of the Armed Forces lost in Afghanistan and Iraq. Unconsciously, his hand rose to rub the scar at his temple.

So many lost. Kirkpatrick. Rogers. Dutton. Williams. Boddington.

Too many lost.

“Dr. Lowell?”

Her voice broke through his thoughts. She stood on the stairs, one hand resting lightly on the wrought iron railing.

“Did I forget something, Dr. Lowell?” Her tone was crisp.

He climbed to his feet. “No. Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot in there.” He strode across the sun-warmed patio and abruptly stuck out his hand.

Her eyes flicked from his hand back up to his face, her brow wrinkled in confusion. “Are we . . . starting over?”

“We are. And please, stop calling me Dr. Lowell. Not even my grad students call me that. Most academic research labs are pretty casual and everyone is on a first-name basis. If we’re working together, it’s going to be weird if you keep calling me

‘Dr. Lowell.’ ” He thrust his hand out further. “Hi, I’m Matt.”

She stared at his hand briefly before sliding her hand into his. “Then it should go both ways.” Matt’s warm hand closed around hers and she returned his firm grip. “Hi, I’m Leigh.”

“Nice to meet you, Leigh. Again.” He released her hand. “I feel like I owe you an apology. I’m not usually this hard to work with, but I’ve been burned working with the police before.”

“You’ve worked a forensics case with the local police?”

“No, it was back when I was at Texas State, finishing my doctorate. My advisor was asked to assist on a case and, as his senior student, I was also involved. We worked with a detective from the San Marcos P.D. He was . . .” Matt’s eyes narrowed briefly in memory. “. . . very difficult to work with.”

“Some officers . . .” Leigh paused as if choosing her words carefully. “Some officers, especially those set in their ways, find new techniques and new procedures to be a challenge. And sometimes, when an officer is ordered to work with outsiders, it doesn’t always go smoothly.”

“You can say that again,” Matt muttered quietly.

“I’m not one of those people. You have knowledge and expertise I don’t. There’s a family out there who’s lost a loved one. They deserve to know what happened, and that lost victim deserves justice. To do that, I need your help.”

“I can help you with your evidence. You’d be surprised how even one bone can help narrow your search. Depending, of course, on the condition of the bone.”

“Which you’ll see shortly.” She glanced at her watch. “But not if I don’t get on the road. Thank you for agreeing to help. I’ll see you at one o’clock.” She strode from the garden and disappeared around the front of the church.

Matt pulled his cell phone from his pocket, speed dialing a familiar number. “Hey, it’s me. I need you all back in the lab by no later than one. We’ve been asked by the police to consult on a case . . . It could be murder.”

CHAPTER TWO:

BITTERN

Bittern: any of twelve species of solitary marsh birds in the same Family as herons. Bitterns are camouflaged by their streaked brown and buff plumage, which lets them hide in plain sight among the reeds and marsh grasses by standing upright with their bills pointed toward the sky.

Monday, 11:59 A.M.

Essex Detective Unit

Salem, Massachusetts

The maze of corridors and rooms that made up the Salem office of the Massachusetts State Police buzzed with activity as Leigh strode down the hallway. She carefully cradled the bone, securely sealed in a clear plastic evidence bag. She passed the door of the long, narrow conference room, glancing in to scan the homicide board at the head of the table and quickly categorized the seven current homicides—four ready to go to court and three currently under investigation. Her own name was associated with “John/Jane Doe” at the bottom of the list.

The hallway opened into the Detective Unit bullpen. The small, cramped room was lined on both sides with an identical trio of short-walled cubicles, their fabric dividers a dull generic beige to match the walls. Every spare foot of available wall space was jammed with filing cabinets or bookcases of binders

detailing protocols or holding forms for the endless river of paperwork.

There were two officers in the bullpen, both dressed in soft clothes. Trooper Brad Riley, the squad rookie, sprawled at his desk, tipped back in his chair. He grinned up at Trooper First Class Len Morrison, one of the senior members of the squad, who leaned casually in the doorway of Riley's cube. Morrison made a rude hand gesture and both men burst out laughing.

Morrison fell silent as Leigh entered the room, his cold eyes flicking toward her. For a brief moment, her steps slowed as his insolent gaze ran up and down her body, but there was nothing seductive or appreciative about his perusal. His lip curled in a sneer, and he deliberately turned his back to her, stepping further into the cubicle to block her view of Riley with his shoulder as if to shield the younger officer.

Eyes fixed straight ahead and her face a blank mask, Leigh marched purposefully past him, leaving as much space between them as the narrow corridor allowed. She slipped inside her own cubicle in the back corner, sinking into her chair. Only then did she let her neutral expression crumple. She closed her eyes, concentrating on pushing back the anger and hurt from Morrison's deliberate snub. It was the second time today she'd been checked out by a man, but at least Matt Lowell's perusal hadn't left her feeling less than a woman. Her eyes shot open as she heard Morrison murmur something to Riley, followed by Riley's answering laugh.

Unconsciously, her right hand clenched into a tight fist. Morrison's exclusion was blatantly meant to hurt, but she would cut out her own heart before she ever let him know how effective it was.

Morrison had made it clear from the beginning that he had it out for her. The daughter of the former Unit Sergeant, she'd been brought in from Field Troop A after only three years on

the job, compared to Morrison's five. His resentment of what he saw as special treatment had been obvious from the moment she set foot in the bullpen. And that resentment was painfully obvious whenever a senior officer wasn't in the room.

The camaraderie between the men in the department was strong, but even after three years in the Detective Unit, Leigh found the men either weren't sure what to make of the only woman in the room or were openly antagonistic. Riley was still learning the ropes, but he was taking his cues from the men around him. She knew the unspoken rule—if she hoped to make it in the Unit, then she had to put her head down and take it. But she didn't have to like it.

She tucked the bone into the messenger bag on her desk, closing and securing the flap.

Sitting back in her chair, she scanned her desk. Like every other officer in the bullpen, she had a huge amount of paperwork to deal with. But unlike the men's desks, which were strewn with forms and notes, her paperwork was organized into folders and neatly stacked, leaving the desktop mostly clear.

She gave a small sigh. Her cubicle was a testament to how she fit into the department. Neat. Organized. Sterile. *Like a square peg in a round hole.* There was almost nothing personal on her desk. The men in the Unit plastered the walls of their cubicles with mementos of their lives—hand-drawn pictures from their kids, photos of their wives and lovers, competition ribbons, ball caps and other sports memorabilia. The Red Sox were sacred in this room and every man proudly displayed his team loyalty.

She was the exception. She had no children, so there were no pictures drawn with more love than skill. She didn't watch sports, which in itself set her apart from the men. And the lack of a lover was a gaping hole in her life.

The only personal memento in her office was the framed

photo behind her mouse pad. Tucked neatly into the corner, it couldn't be seen from the doorway of the cubicle; it was only visible from her chair. Reaching out, she rubbed her thumb along the lower edge of the frame as one might caress a touchstone while she studied the well-loved face.

It was her father's last formal departmental picture. In it, he wore his smoky-blue dress uniform jacket, matching dress shirt, and navy tie tacked down with the State Police insignia. His salt and pepper hair was cut short under his uniform cap and his face was set in serious lines. It was the face he had typically shown the department, but she fondly remembered the man who had shouldered the lonely job of raising a devastated little girl by himself even as he mourned his young wife's death. It had been just the two of them against the world, until the world had taken him away too, leaving her devastated and alone.

I miss you, Dad.

She rubbed her thumb over the frame one more time as if to draw strength from the spirit of the man who had gone before her. Then, sitting back in her chair, she glanced at the time. She needed to get on the road if she hoped to meet Matt and his team at one P.M. Standing, she found the room deserted. Riley and Morrison had slipped out while she was lost in thought.

She squared her shoulders and picked up her messenger bag. She had a job to do. And even if she was on her own, she'd damn well get it done.

Head high, she strode from the bullpen.

CHAPTER THREE: ESTUARY

Estuary: a partially enclosed body of water where fresh river water mixes with salty ocean water in a coastal transition zone.

Monday, 12:50 P.M.

Boston University, School of Medicine

Boston, Massachusetts

Leigh paused in the open doorway to peer into the large lab, brightly lit by banks of overhead fluorescent lights. She scanned the lab—racks of chrome shelving holding trays of pale bones, a whiteboard splashed with anatomical sketches, desks strewn with personal items, and miles of countertops holding equipment and instruments—before finding Matt Lowell on the far side of the room.

Leigh allowed herself a moment to watch him interact with the three students grouped around him. They watched him with rapt attention, freely jumping in to comment or question. She sensed the comfort level and closeness between them; even to a stranger across the room, they felt like a unit.

She knocked quietly on the doorframe.

Matt's head came up sharply and the corner of his lips curved in a welcoming smile. "Excuse me for a minute, guys." He crossed the room toward her in long strides. "Come in." He indicated the messenger bag tucked under her arm. "Is that it?"

"Yes. I also brought the maps you requested."

“Great. Come meet my students.”

They turned to face the students across the room, who stared at them with undisguised curiosity. At a quick glance, Leigh placed each of the two men and one woman to be in their mid-twenties.

Matt took her arm, pulling her into the group. “Guys, I’d like you to meet Trooper Abbott. Leigh, these are my grad students. They’ll be working with us on this case.” He motioned first to the only female in the group, a tall, slender woman of Japanese descent with an athletic build. She wore her jet-black hair in a loose bun pierced with two artfully placed decorative sticks. “This is my senior grad student, Akiko Niigata. Kiko, this is Trooper Leigh Abbott.”

Kiko smiled and extended her hand. “Hi.” Her features were beautifully exotic, but her confident voice was born-and-bred American.

“And this is Paul Layne.” Matt indicated a tall, lanky young man with slightly spiky dark-blond hair wearing a red hoodie and worn jeans.

Paul’s clear blue eyes fixed on her with blatant interest, and there was a glint of humor in them as he abruptly stuck out his hand. “Hey.”

She smiled back at him as she shook his hand. “Hey.”

“And Juka Petrović,” Matt continued.

Leigh turned to the last student who stood silently a half pace behind the others, a stocky young man with a swarthy complexion and dark eyes and hair.

“It’s very nice to meet you.” His soft-spoken, slightly formal greeting carried a hint of Eastern Europe.

“Let’s take a look at what we have here,” Matt suggested. “Paul, get the door, please. All of this has to stay confidential. And we’re going to be handling evidence, so lab coats and gloves on.” He glanced at Leigh. “I’ve already filled them in on the

background details and the security requirements.”

They gathered around a stainless steel table that was large enough to hold a complete set of remains. Reaching inside her messenger bag, Leigh withdrew the evidence bag and handed it to Matt.

He pulled out the long, thin bone, cradling it carefully in both hands, turning it over as he examined it.

What remained of the small ball of nerves in Leigh’s stomach loosened as she noted the care he took with the evidence. “What can you tell me about our victim?”

“I can’t tell you race or sex, not from this particular skeletal component, but there are still details I can give you. How much do you remember from class?”

Leigh flushed. “You covered a lot of ground in a short period of time. And some of it’s kind of fuzzy for me three years later.”

“So not much, in other words. That’s okay; that’s why you’ve got us.” He turned to his students. “I want you to each examine the bone, then we’ll discuss it.” He handed the bone to Kiko.

Leigh shifted restlessly, wanting to jump in to speed the discussion along, but Matt caught her eye, something in his expression asking her to wait. She reluctantly swallowed her impatience, watching Kiko as she cradled the bone carefully in both hands, staring at it silently.

“Everything okay?” Matt asked his student when she remained silent and motionless.

“Yes. It’s just . . .” Kiko rotated the bone, examining the underside as she spoke. “This isn’t a research specimen from some old man who died in his sleep at ninety and donated his body to science. This isn’t from someone who lived centuries ago . . .” She paused and met Matt’s eyes. “Although you know seeing a child’s tiny bones gets me every time. This is someone who was alive within the past few years. Someone I could have met on the street.” Her gaze dropped to the bone and she turned

it over in her hands again. "Someone who died young, maybe even the same age as me. It's just . . ."

"A little freaky," Paul finished for her. "Yeah, we feel it too."

Leigh studied the students as they grouped together around the table. Her concern about involving Matt's students started to diminish; these kids might work out fine after all.

Kiko passed the bone to Paul. Juka then examined it before handing it back to Matt. "Okay, tell me what we're looking at," Matt said. "I know this is different from anything you've done before, but put emotion aside for a few minutes and simply look at the evidence. This is how we can do the most good."

"It's a radius," Paul stated. "More specifically, a left radius." He held out his left arm toward Leigh, running his index finger from his inner elbow to his wrist, ending at the base of his thumb.

"It's from someone likely in their late teens or early twenties based on epiphyseal fusion," Kiko added.

When Juka remained silent, Matt simply looked at him expectantly. "The bone shows signs of being buried," Juka said. "Possibly for a prolonged period of time. It also shows signs of scavenging. Probably rats. Maybe opossums."

"And that's on top of the beaver." Matt straightened and stepped back from the table, turning to Leigh. "That's a very fast macroscopic examination. To be able to give you an opinion that you could use in court we'd need to do a microscopic examination, which takes a little more time."

Leigh's brows drew together as she studied the bone. "Why didn't you comment on the cut mark on the bone?"

Matt's face clouded briefly. "Cut mark?"

She pointed to one end of the bone—a wedge-shaped indentation was clearly visible where the flared end met the shaft. "That was made by a weapon, right? Possibly giving us cause of death?"

Matt shook his head. “No, there are no tool marks—or, as we call them, kerf marks—on this bone. If you look closely, you can see that there are no sharp margins in the defect. That mark is actually a remnant of normal maturation. It’s where cartilage once lay at the growth plate before being converted to bone.”

“Really?” Leigh leaned in to examine the defect more closely. Matt was right; the sides and margins of the notch were smooth and rounded, not sharply defined like a cut from a blade. “Damn. I thought we had something there.”

“We do, just not what you think.”

Straightening, Leigh pulled a small spiral-bound notepad and pen from her inside breast pocket. Flipping it open, she made a few quick notes.

“You don’t have to write this down,” Matt said, tapping her notepad with an index finger. “I’m not expecting you to remember every detail or make notes to cover all of it. I’ll give you a full report.”

She glanced up. “Yes, you will.” She bent over her notepad again, but not before catching the expression of incredulity that flashed across Matt’s face, and Paul’s quick amused grin at her blunt expectation of a report. “But I’d like to get some of this information down now. My sergeant will want an update later today. So, that mark. You’re saying there was soft tissue there that decomposed after death, leaving that gap?”

“Exactly. It’s one way that we’re estimating the victim’s age. Now, we can be a lot more accurate when we’ve got the full remains and we can consider dentition, cranial suture fusion, and pubic symphysis modification.”

“Fair enough. Can you estimate how long it’s been buried to narrow down my missing persons search?”

“That’s a little harder to do from just this one piece of evidence. Buried bones tend to absorb minerals and take on the color of the soil around them, given full skeletonization and

enough time. This bone has started this process so it's been buried for at least a couple of years. Except that it didn't stay buried. Somehow scavengers got to it."

"Considering that this bone was removed from the burial site, is it safe to assume that we're going to be missing other pieces of the remains?" Leigh asked.

"It's doubtful that it was the only bone taken."

Her lips a tight line, Leigh met Matt's eyes. "So it doesn't bode well for recovery or identification of this victim."

"Maybe. We need to move fast on this because if the remains are only partially exposed, we might be able to recover the majority of the victim. Perhaps only one arm was exposed and removed."

Leigh's eyes narrowed. "Why were the remains exposed? That could be very important for locating the actual burial site."

"It could," Matt allowed. "Let's get out the maps. I think this bone will be able to tell us enough to give you a good idea of where to start looking."

Matt watched Leigh pull a well-used, highly detailed map from her messenger bag and lay it out on the table. "The beaver dam where the bone was found is here." She indicated an area of the northern Essex coast, just west of Cape Ann, the small, easternmost peninsula in Essex County.

"Essex Bay," Kiko murmured. "Was the dam right on the river?"

"No, it's on one of the smaller branches west of the river, just north of the Essex Marina," Leigh replied.

"So, north of Route 133." When Leigh looked up in surprise, Kiko said, "Local girl. I grew up in Gloucester."

"Good to know."

Matt carefully studied the map, noting the network of channels that drained into Essex Bay. "That's pretty close to both

the town and the marina. I'm assuming you've already done a detailed search of the area?"

"We came up empty. We worked in conjunction with the Essex Police Force because it's their jurisdiction. They're only a fourteen-man force, but they were a huge help because they really know their district." Leigh tapped the span of Essex Bay with her index finger. "Part of what makes the search for the rest of the remains difficult is the terrain."

"Makes it tough when part of your search area is under water twice a day," Kiko stated.

"Exactly."

"Wait. You're talking about the tide?" Matt asked.

"Yes. You said earlier that you haven't been to Essex County since you first came to Massachusetts," Leigh said. "How much time did you spend on the coast?"

He shrugged. "Almost none. I've been down to the wharves in town and to a beach or two, but most of my water time is on the Charles. I row."

Leigh's gaze suddenly skimmed downwards, over his chest and arms, and he felt a small spurt of heat when her eyebrow unconsciously cocked in appreciation. Then Kiko spoke, drawing them both back into the conversation.

"Spending time on the wharves here in town would only count in this discussion if you did it two hundred years ago," she said. "Back when Boston was a tiny peninsula surrounded by swampland before they filled in those areas to allow the town to grow. But that's the kind of area you still find along the Essex coast. It's a huge, complex ecosystem."

"And this here—" Paul tapped the section of coast Leigh had indicated was the site of the discovery of the bone. "It's a swamp?"

"Salt marsh, actually." Leigh indicated a shaded portion on the map. "Basically, it's a large area of low-lying wetland, with

no roads or houses inside the actual marsh.”

“You obviously didn’t find a full set of remains when you did the search,” Matt stated. “Where did you look?”

Leigh used the end of her pen as a pointer, circling a large area of coast. “We covered west of the Essex River and north of Route 133. We even checked the Spring Street Cemetery because someone suggested the bone might have been removed from a grave there.”

“Worth checking out considering the proximity,” Matt agreed. “It didn’t pan out though, obviously.”

“No, there was no disturbance in the cemetery and there was no sign of other human remains anywhere. We also dragged the river.”

“It’s not in the river,” Juka reminded her. “The color of the bone tells us that it was buried.”

“I know that now. But at the time, considering the bone was found in the beaver dam, checking the river was a logical next step.”

“What’s the soil like there?” Paul asked.

“Assuming it’s the same as Gloucester, the soil is very loamy with a high sand component so it usually has good drainage,” said Kiko.

Matt glanced back at the radius. “That would explain the brown tinge to the bone. Clearly it’s been buried in well-drained, dry soil.”

“What makes you think that?” Leigh interrupted.

“It’s a guess,” Matt explained, “based mostly off the minimal scavenging marks on the bone, but I think these remains went through putrefaction and full decomposition while still buried.”

“The lack of adipocere substantiates your assessment,” Kiko said, then looked at Leigh. “You probably know adipocere as ‘grave wax.’ ”

"I've heard that term," Leigh said. "But I don't know much about it."

"Adipocere is a thick, waxy substance that's sometimes found on bodies when fatty tissue decomposes in the presence of moisture and bacteria and without oxygen," Matt explained. "It's significant because it slows the normal process of putrefaction to a crawl."

"But you know this didn't happen because the bone was found without flesh, right?" Leigh asked. "So that gives you more information about where the body was buried."

Matt was pleasantly surprised; she'd been paying attention. "That's right. And we know from the types of scavenger tooth marks on the bone that decomposition had already gone to completion before they had access to it."

Leigh straightened. "So what does all of this really tell us?"

"It means we won't find the remains in the intertidal zone," Kiko said. "There's simply too much moisture. The area within the intertidal zone is flooded with seawater at high tide. Even if it's only a couple of inches deep, the ground is still saturated twice a day. A body buried in that area would almost certainly have adipocere." She whistled. "That's a huge area to take out of the search."

"It's going to make our job much easier." Matt bent over the map and drew a large circle with his index finger around the marsh that surrounded the Essex River. "You can cut this area way down. Any area that's in the intertidal zone is very unlikely to hold the missing remains."

Leigh's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Cut it all out? Are you sure?"

"That's what you wanted us for," Matt pointed out. "To locate your remains and determine what happened to your victim. This is just the first step."

Leigh gave a surprised half-laugh. "Well, yes, I knew from

your class that you'd be good, but I didn't think when I brought you one bone that you'd be able to tell me this much this fast."

"It's simply a matter of reading the evidence you've given us. The next thing to think about is why was this bone recovered? We know the body was buried, but why was it just found by scavengers after all this time?"

"So you mean something like reports of digging that uncovered something unusual or a sand dune that collapsed revealing something beneath it?" Kiko asked.

"Exactly. What else?"

"Heavy rains?" Paul asked.

"What about high coastal winds?" Leigh suggested.

The missing puzzle piece suddenly clicked into place in Matt's head and he snapped fully upright. "Idiot!"

Leigh straightened abruptly in surprise. "Excuse me?" she asked icily.

Matt shook his head at her distractedly. "No, no. Not you. Me. I should have thought of it sooner. I know exactly why your body has just surfaced. You just said it—heavy rains and high coastal winds."

Kiko gave a small jerk. "Of course!" She leaned forward over the table. "Let me see that map."

Matt pulled the map toward them and they bent over it together.

"Hold on, hold on . . ." Leigh slapped both palms down on the map. "You lost me. What just happened?"

Matt looked up to meet her eyes. "Hurricane Claire."

Leigh gave a small gasp as she suddenly understood the implications of his theory.

Hurricane Claire, a Category 2 storm that struck Massachusetts two weeks earlier, had first devastated Nantucket and then made landfall on Cape Cod. The eye of the storm transected the Cape before thundering across Cape Cod Bay

and Boston Harbor. After making landfall one last time at Manchester, it had moved up the Essex coast and into New Hampshire.

"The damage from the storm," she breathed. "Essex County was hit *hard*."

"Yes, it was." Reaching over to a nearby bench, he picked up a curved pair of forceps. "The path of the storm went like this." Matt dragged the tip of the forceps from the open ocean, over the triangular form of Nantucket Island, over the center of Cape Cod, and then out into open water again. "The final landfall was in Manchester, right?" He glanced at Leigh, who nodded. "The eye then stayed parallel to the coast inland by about five miles before moving into New Hampshire. What category was it when it hit Manchester?"

"It was still Category 2 strength," Leigh answered. "Do you think the wind and rain uncovered the remains?"

"I'm actually thinking more along the lines of the storm surge—the wall of seawater hurricane force winds push onto land. We know the storm hit here at Manchester." He circled the small town on the south side of Cape Ann. "But because hurricane winds move in a counterclockwise direction in this hemisphere, the winds would have circled around the Cape to blow southwest . . . directly into Essex Bay and right up the Essex River."

"But if the southwest winds are driving the storm surge," Kiko murmured, her eyes locked on the map, "that means the remains came from upstream of the dam. From here." She pulled a pencil from her pocket and drew a circle on the map around the coast and a section of the salt marsh. "Northeast from where the bone was found."

Matt stepped back far enough to lean against a bench top. "It makes sense, doesn't it? Hurricane Claire blows through two weeks ago, generating a storm surge driven by hurricane force

winds. The storm surge strips the soil from over the grave, or at least from part of it, uncovering a burial that's remained hidden for several years. The surge then carries parts of those newly revealed remains inland. Travel backwards from the end point of the surge and you get a potential area for the burial site." He glanced at Leigh to find her green eyes focused sharply on him. "You were searching in the wrong place, and certainly on the wrong side of the Essex River. The burial site could easily be a mile or more away from the beaver dam."

Leigh made another note in her notebook. "We need to confirm a storm surge happened in that area."

"If it did, the National Hurricane Center will know, but other areas along the coast experienced a storm surge, so I'd be surprised if this area was left untouched." He tapped the map with the forceps. "This is a rough estimate. But it's enough for us to get started."

With a quick flip, Leigh closed her notebook. "I agree." She glanced at her watch. "We have a little over six hours of daylight left."

"We can be ready to roll in about twenty minutes." Matt addressed his students. "You'll each need a full field kit with a complete set of brushes and probes. Juka, Paul—make sure we have a couple of shovels and small spades and Tyvek suits for each of us. We'll also need a couple of body bags and several tarps in case we find something this afternoon and need to secure the scene overnight." He turned to Leigh. "Your guys will take care of sample collection at the site? We're also going to need to thoroughly document the scene before we break ground and then throughout the process since the excavation will destroy the scene."

"If we are lucky enough to find the remains, I'll get Crime Scene Services out to take samples and photos."

"We'll take our own set of photos so we've got them on hand

in case we need to refer to them during reconstruction. Kiko, pack your sketch pads and all the camera equipment. And make sure you're all dressed appropriately. This is going to be messy. We're going to be aiming for dry ground, but it sounds like we're going to have to go through muddy ground to get there, so wear appropriate footwear." He glanced at Leigh. "You're coming with us?"

"After what we just figured out? You've got to be kidding. I wouldn't miss it."

His gaze skimmed over her tailored suit. He was looking forward to seeing her in something more flattering. He also wouldn't object to something more form fitting. "You'll need to change. You go out in that and you'll ruin your suit."

"Don't worry about me." She turned to Kiko. "Do you know the seafood restaurant just east of the Essex main strip? Across from the marina on Route 133?"

Kiko grinned. "Do I ever. Best fried clams on the North Shore."

"Let's meet in the parking lot there at three P.M. That should give you enough time to get your equipment together and to drive up. I'll stop in Salem to report to my sergeant and change clothes, then I'll meet you there."

"That works." Matt glanced down at the map one last time, his eyes fixed on the land contained within the circle Kiko had drawn over their new search area. "Let's see if we can find those remains."