



JEN J. DANNA
WITH ANN VANDERLAAN

*Lament The
Common Bones*

ABBOTT AND LOWELL FORENSIC MYSTERIES

Lament the Common Bones

Also by Jen J. Danna and Ann Vanderlaan

Abbott and Lowell Forensic Mysteries

Dead Without a Stone to Tell It

No One Sees Me 'Til I Fall

A Flame in the Wind of Death

Two Parts Bloody Murder

FBI K-9s

(Writing as Sara Driscoll)

Lone Wolf

Before It's Too Late

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Abbott and Lowell Forensic Mysteries

Jen J. Danna

with Ann Vanderlaan

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The title of this novel comes from the eighteenth poem in a collection translated by Red Pine. The poems are attributed to Hanshan, who referred to himself as Cold Mountain, and are believed to have been written during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 A.D.). Hanshan fled with his family during the An Lu-shan rebellion to the Tientei mountains and created a new identity for himself. The translator Red Pine states, “In the entire history of Chinese culture, no other poet has managed to preserve the veil of mystery concerning his true identity as well as Cold Mountain, and I propose that this was not literary conceit but a matter of life or death.”

*I spur my horse past ruins;
ruins move a traveler's heart.
The old parapets high and low
the ancient graves great and small,
the shuddering shadow of a tumbleweed,
the steady sound of giant trees.
But what I lament are the common bones
unnamed in the records of immortals.*

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J.J.D.

PROLOGUE: FIRESTEEL

Firesteel: a piece of high-carbon or alloyed steel used to start fires. When struck with a chert or other sharp-edged rocks, the resulting sparks ignite the tinder.

Sunday, 3:10 p.m.
Amherst, Massachusetts

The victim's breath gurgled a strangled cry as blood flowed hot and fast over dirty skin. Over the blade. Over fingers clenched surely around the handle.

Crimson spurted in a wide arc over new leaves, clinging briefly before the falling rain swept it away. Washed clean by Nature herself.

The body went limp and fell spread-eagled in the bright new grass, already lifeless. The man stood over him, the blade hanging at his side while blood dripped from the razor-sharp edge to spatter in a dark stain at his feet.

In spring, life began anew. And so it would for him.

He looked around, surveying his land. Those who had no right tried to take everything from him. But it was his land and his laws. His right to live as he chose. His right to protect his own. And to wreak his vengeance on those who would ruin him for their own gain.

With a practiced hand, he wiped the blade on the dead man's worn flannel shirt and then slipped it into its sheath for later scouring. A neglected tool, dull or nicked, could be a death sentence. And he meant to live.

He dug the toe of one boot under the torso and rolled the dead weight of the corpse. Then he seized a ragged shoe in both hands and dragged the body deeper into the cover of the nearby woods. There he would set the scene and let Nature take its course.

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Nature knew how to make man one with her, so all would be clean and new.

He looked down at the face frozen in death. So old for his age, so jaded. A life squandered before it had barely started.

Now he had paid.

And would pay again.

CHAPTER ONE: BATTLESPACE

Battlespace: the entire field of combat—air, ground, sea, satellite reconnaissance, human intelligence, and environment.

Thursday, December 5, 3:24 p.m.

Washington Street

Haverhill, Massachusetts

A furious whine streaked past Leigh's ear, close enough to stir the air. She threw herself against the grimy wall, her heart pounding. She flattened against the crumbling surface as the sound of gunfire exploded around her again. *Damn, that was close.* Another inch closer and she'd have a scar all too similar to Matt's.

The air reeked of sulfur and profanities rang from the far end of the building. Across the dim hallway, Brad Riley peered at her through an open doorway. She answered his unspoken question with a hurried nod and jerked her head toward the corridor branching to their left. *Cover me.* He nodded and swung into the hallway, gun clenched in both hands. The newest member of the Massachusetts State Police Essex Detective Unit, this was Riley's first gang op. The pressure showed in his sheet-white face, but his Smith and Wesson M didn't waver in his grip. He slid across the hallway, his shoulder to the corner, and only paused long enough to take a deep breath before darting into the open, firing toward the end of the hall.

Leigh sprinted around the corner behind him, aiming for the open door on the far side of the corridor. She nearly plowed into another Essex officer, Chris Tapley, as she bolted for cover.

Leigh took advantage of the few seconds of safety to catch her breath. "How did they know we were coming?" she gasped.

"No idea." Tapley pushed sweaty hair out of his eyes. "But from the way this went south from the get-go, someone tipped

them off.”

Now they were pinned down in the middle of a firefight.

“They’re holed up at the end of the hall.” Tapley jerked a thumb toward the rear of the building. A former shoe factory, the once open space of the second floor had been divided by cheap drywall into smaller sections. The walls now showed their age in crumbling patches, stains, and creeping splotches of mold. Abandoned for over twenty years in a run down, graffiti-laden neighborhood, and surrounded by more empty buildings, it was a perfect gang hideaway.

“Trapped is more like it,” Leigh said. “And trapped is desperate and dangerous.”

As if in reply, more gunfire erupted, accompanied by a cry of pain and the sound of someone falling heavily to the ground.

“Time to end this.” Tapley readjusted his bulletproof vest. “You with me?”

She nodded. “Riley’s just across the hall, so he’s with us, too. Do you know where everyone else is?”

“STOP went first,” he said, referring to the state police Special Tactical Operations, their version of a SWAT team. “The Haverhill cops were in front of me. They took cover further up the hall. I came in with several FBI agents but lost them when we took cover.” He cocked his head at the sudden silence, unease etched into his expression. “Let’s go.”

He moved to the doorway, angling his body to peer down the hallway, and then he stepped through the door. Leigh followed close behind, and Riley shifted from the opposite wall to join them.

All hell broke loose.

Volleys of gunfire came so fast they sounded like cannon fire rather than multiple rounds. Tapley jerked, his hand flying upward, his finger reflexively clutching the trigger to loose a round at the ceiling. Blood flew, splattering in a warm spray across Leigh’s cheek. She jerked in shock, watching in horror as first Riley flew backwards, and then Tapley did a jittery dance before crumpling into the hall.

It only took seconds, but it felt like minutes to drag air into her shocked lungs. She ripped the radio off her duty belt. “Officers down! Second floor, west side.” She jammed the radio back into place.

More gunshots, followed by a wave of running feet and bellows of rage. Riley sprawled just ten feet away, but that distance might have been ten miles with the bullets screaming down the corridor. But Tapley was within reach—he’d fallen with his left foot across the threshold. Leigh re-holstered her gun and grabbed his boot. She grunted with effort as she dragged two hundred plus pounds of dead weight into the room.

“Come on, Tapley, help me out here.” She focused on his pale face—his eyes were open and his mouth moved soundlessly. Red drenched his shirt collar and spread in a dark patch above the vest. She fell to her knees beside him and yanked his vest open to see where he was hit.

As she uncovered the wound, blood spurted and then pooled at the edge of the vest, just under his collarbone. Frantic, she searched for something to staunch the blood, but the room was empty except for rusted beer cans, a broken bottle, and splintered two-by-fours lining the wall. Leigh planted both hands over the shredded flesh and applied pressure.

“Come on, Chris. Stay with me.” Her voice shook and she swallowed hard, steadying herself in an attempt to camouflage her fear. “Your wife will kill you if you don’t hang on.”

She pushed harder, ignoring both his groans and the slip of slick blood under her palms. Shadowy forms sprinting by the open doorway drew her attention. As they ran past, she saw Riley commando-crawling into the opposite room under his own power. Relief was like a bucket of warm water poured over frozen flesh. *Hit, but still in the game.*

Her relief lasted for only a few seconds as Leigh returned her attention to Tapley to find his head lolling and his eyes open and staring. She focused on his chest, but couldn’t tell if it was rising and falling in the watery light filtering through the grimy window.

“Chris!” She crouched over him, an ear over his mouth, but

she couldn't hear over the shouts, gunfire, and the frantic heartbeat in her ears. She searched for a pulse, pressing two fingers deep into the clammy flesh of his throat. Nothing. "Damn it, Tapley, don't you dare die on me."

Making the nearly impossible choice between blood loss and the lack of a pulse, Leigh layered her hands over his breastbone and started CPR. Fingers laced together, she counted, trying to ignore the weakening blood spurts from the open wound.

"On your knees!" The bellowed order came from down the hall, followed by the sound of more running feet as Riley came through the door.

"It's over." Riley's gaze fell on Tapley. "Shit, Abbott."

"I'm holding him. I've radioed for help, but I need you to meet the paramedics if the coast is clear." Leigh's words jerked out in a steady rhythm, punctuating the chest compressions. "You okay?"

Riley crouched down on the other side of Tapley. "Bullet hit the vest. Knocked the wind out of me and will leave a bruise, but that's the worst of it. Abbott . . . look at him. It's too—"

"Get help." She ruthlessly cut him off, pinning him with a razor-sharp glare.

He must have read the edge of panic in her face because he pushed to his feet and backed away, his eyes fixed on the fallen officer. "I'll get the paramedics."

Leigh turned back to Tapley to take in his pale waxy skin and lifeless blue eyes. She squeezed her eyes closed, shutting out the specter of death, and continued compressions.

One, two, three, four, five . . .

Thursday, December 5, 4:13 p.m.

Interstate-93

Reading, Massachusetts

She's all right.

She's busy, that's why you can't get a hold of her. She needs

to do her job, not answer the phone. She's all right. You'll see.

Matt Lowell signaled the lane change a millisecond before cutting left, slipping through the increasingly sluggish rush hour traffic. As he slid in behind a minivan loaded with roughhousing kids, their heads bobbing in the rear window, he forced himself to ease off the gas and leave a safe distance. But the internal battle between his need to be there *now* and his need not to kill himself or anyone else on the freeway manifested in the machine-gun tapping of his fingers against the steering wheel.

He drew in a deep breath and then forced a slow exhale, trying unsuccessfully to blow out some of his tension. It only left him wound tighter than before.

It had been a normal day until an hour ago—sitting at his desk, tuning out the usual noise and conversation of his grad students as they worked in the lab while he contemplated the direction of his newest manuscript for the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*.

Before the bottom fell out of his world.

Paul ran full-tilt through the door of the lab, clamping one hand on the frame in a futile attempt to control his wild careen through the gap. His gangly frame was an off-balanced windmill of flailing limbs until he abruptly stopped himself by jamming both hands against a lab bench. All conversation halted in shock.

"Where's Leigh?" Paul spoke so quickly his question came out as a single word.

Ice slid through Matt's veins at the panic in Paul's eyes, at the pallor of his skin. His chair slid back from his desk with a screech as he shot to his feet. "On assignment in Haverhill. Why?"

"Can you get in touch with her?"

Kiko and Juka crowded closer, their eyes locked on Paul's pale face.

"She's on assignment. That's cop-speak for 'I'm busy, don't bother me'."

"Was she working the gang take-down?"

"She didn't say. When I'm not involved, she can't tell me

classified details. Why?" Matt struggled against the need to grab Paul by the shoulders and shake him for information.

"Went to the lounge to make coffee. TV was on. A special news bulletin. There was a firefight in Haverhill, multiple injuries. Several gang members dead, and at least one police officer. Didn't say who or what force. But several agencies were involved—FBI, Massachusetts State Police, ATF." Paul stopped and took a deep breath. "Haverhill is in Essex County, so it would be the Essex cops investigating."

Matt already had his phone out, speed dialing Leigh's number. His heart beat triple time to the rhythm of the rings at the other end.

"You've reached Trooper Leigh Abbott of the Massachusetts State Police—"

He cut the connection. "She's not picking up."

Kiko stepped forward and laid a hand on his arm. Her voice was calm and reasonable, but he could hear the effort it took to keep it that way. "You know something's happened, but that doesn't mean she's dead or even injured. She might just be busy."

"I have to find out what's going on."

"Go. We'll see what we can find out from here. Keep your cell on and we'll let you know the moment we learn anything."

He already had his ski jacket in his hand and was sprinting for the hallway.

Up ahead, road signs warned of the upcoming interchange with the I-495. Nearly there. He glanced over his shoulder, but the traffic jammed around him, trapping him helplessly behind the soccer mom.

This is what she does. You knew it when you signed on with her. She has a dangerous job but she's smart and can take care of herself.

He jerked when his cell rang. He pushed a button on the steering wheel to bring the call in through his sound system. "Lowell."

"It's Tucker." Rob Tucker was the Essex Detective Unit's computer genius. Matt and Leigh had worked cases with him, and

Tucker was currently involved in an off-the-books investigation with them. As far as Matt was concerned, he was the 'go-to' inside the department for information. If there was something to uncover, Rob Tucker was the man for the job. He'd been Matt's first call as he jogged to his SUV.

Soccer mom and her van of kids suddenly jockeyed for a position in the middle lane, earning a blast of horn from a hatchback she cut off. Matt took advantage of the gap in the snarl of cars and shot past them. "What have you got?"

"Nothing much so far. It's pure chaos up there, and the radio calls reflect the confusion. I can't reach anyone on their cell and the reports coming in are jumbled. What I can say is the op went wrong and every on-duty cop in Haverhill is there now along with half of Field Troop A. Every ambulance in the area is also on site, but I can't get confirmation of who's injured, who's down, and who's in one piece. Are you almost there?"

"Nearly half way. I'll be there in about twenty minutes if I don't get pulled over for going eighty in a sixty-five."

"If someone pulls you over, call me, and I'll get them to escort you. Now get the hell up there and find her. Call me if you hear anything; I'll do the same."

"Done." Matt ended the call.

Leigh always considered herself the square peg in the round hole of her department. But Tucker's blatant concern for her settled some of the jagged edges in Matt's gut.

The sign for his exit flashed overhead and Matt jammed his foot down on the accelerator, shooting ahead to weave deftly through traffic and finally swing onto the off-ramp to head east.

She has to be all right.

Thursday, December 5, 5:02 p.m.

Washington Street

Haverhill, Massachusetts

Even from inside the old factory as she escorted a handcuffed gang member outside, Leigh could hear Matt's insistent voice through the open door before she saw him.

"Get out of my way before I move you myself."

"This is a crime scene. Civilians aren't allowed."

Pausing near the door, Leigh's heart sank at the snarl that could only be Trooper Len Morrison, another Essex Detective Unit officer and the bane of her existence. Morrison would delight in making Matt's life difficult simply because of his connection to Leigh.

"Goddamn it, you know I'm not a civilian." Frustration darkened Matt's tone. "I'm her partner and I need to see her. Where is she?"

"You're a *consultant* and this isn't a case for you."

"That may be, but I was also a medic. I can help those needing medical assistance if you're shorthanded."

Leigh stepped out of the building, swallowing an involuntary gasp of shock as the biting winter wind sliced across her skin. Dark had already fallen, but headlights and flashing emergency lights lit the area as if it were daytime. Twenty feet away, Morrison faced down Matt outside the police tape, his stocky frame blocking the way. Behind them, reporters shouted out questions and cameras flashed as they tried to get story tidbits from anyone inside the scene.

"You help the dead." Morrison's tone was scathing, his weight tipped onto his toes as if inviting attack. "We don't have your kind of dead here."

Even though she was exhausted, emotionally wrung out, and desperate for the world to go away, anger flared through Leigh. She knew what Morrison was doing: barring Matt from the scene while implying there were dead on site—fresh dead, not the decomposed or skeletonized remains that were Matt's specialty.

Matt would be frantic. Knowing Morrison, he loved every minute of it.

How can he play games like this considering what's happened? She turned to a tall officer wearing a heavy navy winter coat, a knit cap pulled low on his forehead, as he settled another handcuffed man into the back of a cruiser.

“Carmichael, have you got this for a second? My partner’s on scene and I want to bring him in.”

Carmichael slammed the door and reached for Leigh’s prisoner. “I’ve got him. Go.”

Leigh turned into the wind, wincing as the cold snaked inside her open jacket. She glanced down, numbly cataloging the dark smears of blood barely visible against the navy and the brighter splashes contrasting against her pale blouse. Dried blood caked her hands, disappearing beneath her cuffs.

Tapley.

She looked away, shuttering the pain and sorrow. Experience had taught her that those who didn’t allow themselves to work through their feelings burned out early. But this kind of grief was intensely private. Today, she needed to reflect the public face of the department; later, she’d allow the emotion free rein. Her throat tightened as she swallowed and blinked a few times to beat back the moisture burning at the edges of her eyelids.

She circled a squad car, its lights flashing in blinding bursts of red and blue, and took in the scene. The two men were still standing chest to chest as she’d seen once before: Matt with the advantage of several inches of height, Morrison with considerably more bulk. Matt stood with both boots planted, one hand clenched at his side, and, for a moment, Leigh thought he was going to lay into Morrison. Past dealings with Morrison might automatically put Matt on the defensive, but he wasn’t the type to haul off and hit someone without cause. The fact he was walking that line spoke volumes about his level of desperation.

She stepped into his line of sight. “Matt.”

Matt started and then jerked his head toward her. Beneath the tousled dark hair worn long over his forehead to hide a battle

scar, emotions spilled across his face at lightning speed—relief, joy, concern, and finally alarm. His gaze shifted from her bloody hands to her ruined clothes and up to her blood-splattered face, rapidly cataloging the disconnect between her appearance and physical state.

She waited until his gaze finally settled on her face, seeing the fear in his eyes morph into deduction. “It’s not my blood. Morrison, let him through.”

“He’s not supposed to be on site.”

Enough of this bullshit. She shouldered past Morrison, forcing him back with a low curse. She lifted the yellow tape and stepped aside to allow Matt to duck under into the crime scene.

“Next time you want to be a bastard,” she said with a hiss to Morrison, “pick a less disrespectful moment. Tapley’s dead.” She indicated her bloody shirt with a crimson-stained hand and felt a rush of satisfaction as Morrison jerked, the color leeching from his cheeks. “Back off.” She spun away, not able to look at him anymore.

Clamping her lips together to keep from tearing a strip off Morrison in front of the media, she marched to Matt. “This way,” she snapped.

He followed in silence, but she could feel the weight of his gaze on her back. They rounded the corner of the factory and stopped a few feet down a shadowed alley. Only then did she turn to him, desperately searching for the calm that continued to elude her. “I’m sorry about Morrison.”

“Screw Morrison.” He stepped closer and took her icy hands in his.

“Matt, don’t. My hands . . .”

Ignoring her protest, he squeezed tighter, the heat and strength in his grip nearly making her whimper. “Who’s Tapley?”

“Trooper Chris Tapley. He’s . . .” She caught herself. “He’d been with the department for seven years. He sat in front of me in the bullpen.” Anguish crowded in on her. She wanted nothing more than to lean against Matt, letting him absorb some of the emotions raging through her, but she was a cop and this was no

time to fall apart. Later, she would tell him everything in detail, but for now, just the highlights. She owed him that much. “It was an op to take out Haverhill’s most violent gang—*Chacal*—to not only stop the drive-bys, but also to dam the flood of crack, heroin, firearms, and live rounds out onto the streets. DA Saxon put together a task force out of the Essex Detective Unit, the FBI, the ATF, and Haverhill PD. A tip came through about a meeting of the top members of *Chacal* here, and the decision was made to go in and take them out. It was a way to cut the head off the snake in one strike, so to speak.”

“But you’re homicide. Why are you involved in a drug bust?”

“Homicide is almost exclusively what I do, but the unit also handles sexual and physical abuse cases, kidnapping, gangs, and white-collar crime. Tapley was the Essex cop working this case, but when the op was called, more hands were needed, and Riley and I were sent in as support.”

She took a moment to breathe in an attempt to find calm before she told him more. “Someone tipped them off, because they knew we were coming. It was a clusterfuck from the start. We were pinned down and then Tapley got hit.”

Closing her eyes, she rested her forehead against his chin. A small hank of hair escaped the knot at her neck to slide forward, clinging to the drying blood on her jaw. “The bullet slipped through just above the chest plate. I managed to drag him into a side room while everything went to hell around us. I did CPR for ten minutes until the paramedics came.” Matt’s jaw tightened as he winced. As a frontline Marine medic in Afghanistan after 9/11, he likely recognized it was a lost cause right from the start. “I just couldn’t let him go. Not on my watch.” Her voice cracked and she gripped his hands a little tighter, her nails biting into his skin as she struggled to maintain.

“You did everything you could. That’s all we can ask from any first responder.” He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand. “God, Leigh, I was absolutely frantic. Paul burst into the lab with news of the op. All we knew was an officer had been killed, but we didn’t know who. I couldn’t get you on the phone. Tucker was

sifting through radio calls but couldn't get anywhere."

Matt drew her closer, holding her hands against his chest. She felt his need for contact as if he'd voiced it, but knew he struggled to keep a professional distance; he was well aware she was on duty and this was a crime scene.

"I'm sorry you lost someone today, but I'm not sorry it wasn't you." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Can you tell me about it once the scene is secure, or do you need to go back to the Unit?"

"I do, and the paperwork will likely take hours. You have a key to my place. Meet me there. I need a shower, but I'd like to tell you the whole story. Then I need to let it go."

"I'll be there. But first I need to call Tucker. Then I need to call the students and my dad. They're all waiting for word."

Leigh's heart lightened a little bit. It was amazing how family came in many forms. This was hers. "How does your dad know?"

"I called him on my way here. I didn't want him to worry when I didn't show for dinner. He told me to call him the moment I knew anything." He gave her a sympathetic smile—he was all too familiar with the hell of losing a brother-in-arms—and then released her hands. "Come home when you can. I'll be waiting."

Leigh looked down the alley, back toward flashing lights and the reality of a fallen officer and dead perps. But she took a little of Matt's warmth, held it tight, and let it bolster her.

Squaring her shoulders, she walked back into chaos.

CHAPTER TWO: FOG OF WAR

Fog of War: a lack of situational awareness because of numerous confusing or contradictory sources of information.

Friday, December 6, 3:46 a.m.

Abbott Residence

Salem, Massachusetts

The car was a mangled wreck, steam pouring from under the crumpled hood where it had speared into the trunk of a massive oak. Inside the car, two men lay beneath the ruins of the air bags, splattered with a mixture of blood and explosive white powder from the bags.

Leigh sprinted toward the car, but each step seemed to only cover inches instead of feet. "Hang on, help is coming!" Her voice was hoarse, as if she'd been screaming for hours.

Finally reaching the car, Leigh wrestled with the jammed handle before she wrenched the passenger door open. Inside, the driver turned and stared at her with dead eyes. And smiled.

Terror shivered down her spine at the expression of unearthly joy.

"He's already dead, you know."

The voice drew her attention down to the passenger pushing free of the wreckage. She staggered backward as he straightened, his clothes splashed with blood. "The driver?"

"Morgan. You've already killed him."

Leigh's gaze flew over the roof of the car to the young man in a state police uniform sprinting toward them. She wanted to scream for him to stop, but the cry remained trapped in her breathless lungs.

"He just doesn't know it yet." When the man turned, Leigh's gun was in his hand. She clapped one hand to her now empty

holster in disbelief. An ear-ringing explosion and Morgan's body jerked as the force of the bullet knocked him off his feet.

The car separating them suddenly gone, Leigh covered the ground to him in just a few steps and fell to her knees beside him. His neck was a ragged wound and blood spread in creeping fingers around his body. She tried to cover the wound with her hands, but blood continued to ooze through her grip.

Beneath her horrified gaze, Morgan's face changed, the close-shaved blond hair growing longer, darkening. His nose lengthened, his eyes muddying from blue to brown as Tapley's face took shape. Blood gushed through the gap of his open bullet proof vest and Leigh found herself once again kneeling in the filthy, abandoned room, counting off beats as the man's life blood rushed over her hands and down onto the floor to puddle around her knees, flowing over the blade of a serrated knife.

A knife?

A movement in her peripheral vision caught her eye and she swung around to see Sergeant Daniel Kepler, all rich fabric and shiny buttons in his ceremonial dress blues, standing in the corner of the room, his eyes fixed on her. "Sir? Help me!" But he simply continued to stare at her, unblinkingly, never sparing a glance for the man dying on the floor. His man.

She turned back to Tapley to find the vest gone. Instead, a long diagonal slash ripped across his belly, spilling intestines out onto the floor.

Still she kept doing compressions as the blood seemed to pump even faster from his body. So much blood. Where was it all coming from?

The blood welled faster, unending thick streams of it, soaking into her clothes and climbing up her body. Tendrils wound over her cheek.

She screamed as the acrid blood rushed into her open mouth and down her throat . . .

"Leigh!" A man's voice penetrated the screaming in her head. With a gasp, she broke free of the dream, jerking upright, struggling hard against the hands that held her. She tried to draw

in a breath, but her lungs were constricted, as if wrapped tight. Kicking out, she tried to free her lower body, but concrete seemed to encase her limbs. In desperation, she threw out an elbow, trying to break free from whatever held her. Pain lanced through her elbow as she connected with something solid.

Matt's grunt of pain cut through the fog, through the confusion and agony, drawing her into the present. Her chest heaving and her throat tight with suppressed sobs, she peered through the blond hair tumbled over her eyes. The lit room seemed blindingly bright as she squinted up at him.

Matt was braced on one arm above her, his eyes clenched tight as he pressed a hand against his jaw. The weight of his lower body held down her legs, while his chest pressed against hers.

"Matt?" Her voice rasped harshly, even to her own ears.

Hazel eyes flew open and his hand dropped away to frame one side of her face. "You're awake. That was a bad one."

She ran her fingertips along his jawline, his five o'clock shadow a rough rasp against her skin. "I hurt you."

"I'll live. You okay?" He eased back slightly, lifting some of his weight from her.

With relief, she pulled a deep, shaky breath into her lungs as she fell back limply on the pillow. "I don't know." She rubbed her hands over her face, trying to clear away the last of the heavy fog.

Matt rolled away, and the room darkened as the bedside light clicked off. His weight settled back on the bed. "Come here."

She pressed against his side, his arms coming around her to pull her in against him as her head naturally found the spot just below his shoulder where the beat of his heart soothed her. Burrowing further, she pressed her face into the curve of his throat, his skin still warm from sleep. She allowed herself a slow breath, pulling in his familiar scent, letting it push away the images of blood and death. With a long sigh, some of the tension flowed from her body.

His fingers threaded through her hair, stroking gently. "Who's Morgan?"

Just like that, the tension returned, stiffening her limbs as she

braced both hands against him to push away.

“Whoa, hold on.” His arms banded tighter around her, holding her still. “What’s wrong?”

She tried to wet her suddenly dry mouth. “How do you know about Morgan? I never told you about him.”

“You called his name. Who is he?”

Indecision froze her tongue. If she told him, would he leave her bed and walk out in disgust? Would he join the ranks of so many others who held her responsible?

Men like Morrison.

She could hear his venomous words in her head as if it had only been yesterday: *I don't know how you live with yourself. You killed a cop, a fellow officer. You might as well have pulled the fucking trigger yourself. If you'd been anybody else's kid, you would have been gone after that. But daddy's girl got off with a pat on the head and an early transfer into the Detective Unit like it was some kind of reward for your failure.*

“You know there isn’t anything you can’t tell me,” he prompted quietly when the uneasy silence continued.

“It might change how you think of me.”

“Not going to happen. I already know who you are.”

The rock-solid surety in his tone eased some of her trepidation. Before she could think it through and come to her senses, she caught the hand he’d tangled in her hair and drew it down over her collarbone. She stopped when their entwined fingers reached the small circle of scar tissue above her left breast. Matt’s body went motionless.

“I got this the day he died,” she whispered.

He stroked his thumb over the scar. “You think you’re responsible for his death.” It wasn’t a question.

She went still, but couldn’t form a response.

“I remember what you said about this scar when you first showed it to me.” Matt’s voice was a quiet rumble in the dark. “When you were trying to convince me my battle scars shouldn’t be hidden.” He took their joined hands and laid them against his side, the gnarled ridges of his scars—the result of an explosion in

Afghanistan—hard under her fingers. “You told me some marks deserve to be worn. You consider your scar penance for something, but I doubt it’s that straightforward. If war taught me anything, it’s that situations are never as black and white as we try to make them.” Letting go of her hand, he settled her securely against him again. “Tell me about him. It’ll never be easier than here, in the dark.”

Spoken by someone who knows, Leigh thought. *You need to be honest with him and it’s never going to be easier than right now.* She took a deep breath and forced the words from between her lips. “I’d been a trooper for two years when it happened. It was only weeks after I lost dad, not that it’s any excuse. If you can’t do the job, you’re a danger to yourself and the public, and you shouldn’t be there.”

“You took some time off?”

“Yes. But sitting at home by myself wasn’t making me feel better, so I went back. I needed to keep busy.” Having lost his mother in the same horrific car accident that left his father paralyzed from the waist down, she knew Matt understood. “Some people said it was too soon. At the time I was stationed with Field Troop A, on highway patrol. A call came in. Trooper Joel Morgan had pulled over a car with a broken taillight on a rural road. But as he approached the vehicle, the driver took off, hoping to escape while Morgan was out of his cruiser. Afterwards, a search of the car found heroin. That’s why they took off. They tried to lose Morgan, but he pursued. I radioed in to assist. But with the two of us after them, they got desperate. They took a corner too fast and lost control. They drove into an oak tree, totaling the car.”

Matt winced, but stayed quiet, allowing her to tell her story at her own pace.

“It was obvious they needed medical assistance, so Morgan radioed for an ambulance. I took the passenger side; Morgan took the driver’s side. I could see the driver was dead through the window. The autopsy later showed he had a ruptured aorta.”

“Gone in less than a minute,” Matt said.

“Morgan checked on him anyway. I went to check the passenger. His door was jammed and I had a hard time getting it open. The guy seemed unconscious, maybe dead. But it turns out he was faking it and only had several broken ribs. When I reached in to check his pulse, he went for my gun. I was too focused on helping him, so his attack caught me off guard. We struggled, but even injured, he got my gun and pistol whipped me with it. I went down. Morgan tried to get to me, but he was shot in the neck. Then he turned the gun on me.”

She had a flash of lying on the ground, pain lancing through her head, panic radiating as she realized she was going to die. Seeing the muzzle turn toward her and knowing that between her and her father, the Abbotts’ four generations in law enforcement would end within a mere matter of weeks. But, unlike her father, there would be no one to mark her passing. Then there was only fiery agony, melting into icy numbness and finally, a blessed blackness.

She surfaced at the warm press of Matt’s lips to her forehead, wordlessly drawing her out of the darkness and back to the present. “The only reason I didn’t bleed out is that the ambulance was already on its way before I was shot. They were pulling up just as I lost consciousness. But it was too late for Morgan. The shot had severed his jugular.”

“You came close yourself. Considering the location of the wound . . .”

“So the surgeon told me. I was the lucky one, but shouldn’t have been. Instead, Morgan died, leaving behind a shattered wife and two small children who didn’t understand why daddy was never coming home again. No one would have missed me. My family was gone by then.”

“I said it earlier and I’ll say it again.” Matt’s voice had a razor-sharp edge to it. “I’m sorry you lost someone, but I’ll never be sorry it wasn’t you. And from what you’ve told me, I don’t see how it was your fault.”

“I forgot for a second that he was a perp. I was only seeing him as a victim at that moment. That rookie mistake cost Morgan

his life.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself. You had an injured man on your hands and you were trying to keep him alive. It’s what you needed to do at that moment.”

“That opinion is in the minority. The guys in Field Troop A didn’t agree with you, by and large. Hell, most of the guys in the unit still don’t, including Morrison. He says the only reason I got away with it was because I was the golden child.” Frustration and bitterness laced her words for the view she never won anything on her own merit, only by riding her father’s coattails. “A lot of the other guys felt I gave up too easily or was stupid to let him get the drop on me.”

“Were you formally reprimanded?”

“No.”

“Meaning the brass didn’t consider you responsible and they had all the evidence in front of them. And it didn’t get in your way when you made the transfer to the detective unit. As I said, you weren’t responsible. Did some of the officers holding you responsible convince you to transfer out of Field Troop A?”

She gave a small, awkward shrug. “I always wanted into the Detective Unit. It was the life dad lived, and I lived it vicariously through him until he died. It was always the end game. But their attitude might have put on a little extra pressure to get out.”

“You called Morgan’s name in the nightmare. He was there? In the dream?”

“They all were. I watched Morgan die again. Then Morgan became Tapley, and I was back in the factory trying to keep him alive. But then Tapley’s bullet wound morphed into the same wounds as John Hershey.” A vision of the nearly-dead victim left by the first killer they’d caught together shimmered into her mind’s eye in a morass of bloody organs and shredded tissue. She rubbed a hand over her face and shook her head to clear it. “Too much blood. Too much death. It’s all getting mixed up in my head.”

“Too much stress and not enough sleep. That’s what likely led to that jumble of memories. It was never a good combination for

me.”

Leigh needed no other explanation. She knew all about Matt’s struggles with PTSD after leaving Afghanistan, and his efforts to find a new life and leave his career in medicine behind. Nightmares had plagued him for years. Worse, waking nightmares had been a horrific result of their first case together. Luckily, none of the cases they’d worked since had put him through that particular hell again. But she feared for the next time they had to deal with a freshly mutilated body.

Leigh lay quietly for a moment, concentrating on the steady beat of his heart. “There was one other thing though. Something that never happened in real life, but I’m sure is my subconscious trying to make a point. In the dream, Kepler was in the room inside the abandoned factory with Tapley and me. He just stood in the corner, staring at us.” She paused, casting her mind back. “No, that’s wrong. Staring at *me*. He never saw Tapley.”

Matt’s head came off the pillow as if staring at her in the dark. “He wasn’t a part of the op today, was he?”

“Not on site. We had so many groups involved; everyone was cherry-picking who they wanted for the actual raid. He was monitoring from Salem, but he sent Riley and me as backup. We weren’t involved until today.”

Matt’s body jerked as connections solidified. “He sent you? The moment things got nasty, he sent you in?”

“Yes.”

Leigh didn’t need to be a mind reader to know where Matt’s mind jumped. She was already there.

Sergeant Kepler. The man who replaced her father after his death. The man she suspected was behind the mysterious deliveries. Packages containing photos of her father’s violent death, and, supposedly, from his shadowy life detailing his nefarious dealings. Except Tucker had already proved the photo was faked and police records at the unit had been changed.

Your father wasn’t the hero you think he was. He was a dirty cop. Soon the world will know it. And you’ll be the one to pay for his crimes.

Someone was trying to smear her father's name. And the more Matt, Tucker, and she worked to find the truth, the more it looked like Kepler was responsible.

"Goddamn it." Matt's voice was tight with anger. "It's been my fear for weeks he might try to kill you to cover things up. Send you out to die in the line of duty because we're getting too close to the truth. That might have been exactly what Kepler intended today. Does Tucker know?"

"I haven't told him. But you don't have to with Tucker. He's likely already connected the dots and will be considering Kepler's motives."

"You mean that Kepler wants you dead?"

"We don't know that."

"No, we don't, but we'd be putting our heads in the sand not to realize there's a possible threat there."

"I know. Tucker's still doing some digging, but if we haven't heard from him in the next couple of days, I'll reach out to him. We need to meet with him again to decide on next steps."

"Sooner rather than later. I don't want Kepler getting the chance to aim another bullet at you."

"Agreed." Rising up on one elbow, Leigh peered at the glowing numbers of the clock on the far beside table. "But in the meantime, we need to get some sleep. It's almost a quarter after four and I need to be in the office first thing."

"I thought you were off."

"I was supposed to be, but no one's off at a time like this." She settled down again, looping one hand over his shoulder and snuggling in. "I'm glad you were here with me tonight."

"Me too." He kissed the crown of her head. "Now put it out of your mind and go to sleep. I'm not going anywhere."

Sleep was a long time coming. Matt slipped off while her brain still whirled and she continued to turn the day's events over in her mind.

It all came down to Kepler. It was time to clear him or bury him.

Before someone buried her.

CHAPTER THREE: OPSEC

OPSEC: Department of Defense acronym for operations security—the process by which an organization categorizes and discloses unclassified information. OPSEC challenges members to look at the organization through the eyes of someone intent on harming its members, resources, or mission.

Monday, December 9, 9:19 a.m.
Boston University, School of Medicine
Boston, Massachusetts

“Matt, can I ask a favor?”

Matt looked up in surprise to find Kiko standing beside his desk. He was so deep into writing a grant proposal to help support their next few years of research at the Old North Church columbarium, he hadn’t heard her come in. “Sure. What’s up?”

“I don’t know what to do about something.” She restlessly shifted her weight from foot to foot.

Intrigued, Matt closed his laptop and gave her his full attention. This awkwardness was new for his senior grad student; usually she was the most self-assured student in the room. Of Japanese descent, Kiko carried herself with grace and the strength brought about by years of martial arts training with her *katana*, a traditional Japanese sword.

“What’s the problem?” He pressed a little harder when she hesitated. “I can’t help if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

“Do you remember when we were at the conference last summer, how I met that girl doing her Ph.D. at Harvard? Cynthia? The one in Sharpe’s lab?”

Trevor Sharpe. The name was like fingernails on a blackboard. Matt liked to think he was easy to get along with in his professional life—he fought for what was his and his students’,

but he always tried to be collegial and a fair collaborator both inside and outside his field of expertise. But one experience with Trevor Sharpe had forever tainted his opinion of the man.

“I remember,” he said, his tone flat.

“Well, day before yesterday, I was at Harvard. Cyn invited me to look at her work. They’ve been exploring some new technical aspects of 3D computer facial modeling, and she knew I’d be interested. She doubted Sharpe would be pleased about her showing one of your students the tricks of their trade, so we saved it for a Saturday afternoon when he wouldn’t be in the lab. He was busy with some sort of Christmas thing at his wife’s business.”

Matt’s gaze drifted to the calendar on the corner of his desk—December 9. He pushed away the thought of how far behind he was in his Christmas shopping.

“When I got there, Cyn was the only person in the lab,” Kiko continued. “But when she tried to show me their modeling, she had an issue connecting to the group’s server, so she left the lab to reboot it. I was killing time, so I wandered around.”

Matt chuckled. “Doing a little spying?”

“I admit I was curious. I’ve only worked in this forensic anthropology lab. I mean, we’ve spent a lot of time in Rowe’s facilities lately,” Kiko said, referring to the Medical Examiner for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Dr. Edward Rowe, and the cases they’d worked with him. “But it’s not the same thing. So, yeah, I was looking at their work.” She glanced around the lab, her gaze travelling from the bone grinder sitting beside the light microscope, to the box of animal bones in the corner that still needed sorting months after it arrived, to the shelf with the antelope and alligator skulls, and finally to the tiny fetal skeleton on the countertop. “Their lab is bigger than ours.”

“Of course it is,” Matt said, struggling to keep professional jealousy out of his tone. He wasn’t sure he managed it. “Sharpe is considered a big deal there.”

Kiko contemplated him with a narrowed expression. “And yet you don’t think he’s a big deal. You’ve never said why you don’t like him.”

“I’ve never said I don’t like him.”

“That’s true. You haven’t. But I can see it. You *really* dislike him, enough that he’s not a topic of conversation for you, even though he’s just across the Charles and is a professional competitor, so to speak. Maybe someday you’ll tell us why.”

As disconcerting as it was, Matt took it as a positive sign of the group’s connectedness that Kiko could see through him so easily. It was one reason they worked well together. “Maybe someday.”

Kiko skirted Matt’s desk to stand in front of a fully articulated adult skeleton hanging from a stainless-steel stand. A plush Santa hat sat jauntily on its smooth ivory skull. “Anyway, like most anthropology or anatomy labs, they have an anatomical skeleton just like this. In fact, they have several, but one was sort of pushed into a back corner. And I noticed something odd about it.” Her voice trailed off as she picked up the skeleton’s right hand, and then dropped it, watching it swing back and forth several times.

Matt tipped his chair back, his eyes narrowed on his student. It was unlike Kiko to be so hesitant. She stood stiffly, and when she moved, her usual athletic gait seemed stilted. But he remained quiet, letting her take her time.

She spun around suddenly. “I swear this isn’t because of the cases we’ve worked with Leigh. I’m not looking for victims because I want more criminal work.”

Matt bolted upright in his chair. “Victims?”

“The skeleton. I don’t think the person died of natural causes.”

“Why?”

“Usually we buy anatomical skeletons from scientific suppliers, right? They used to come from India or China, but both those countries have put a stop to exporting human remains, so now it’s more a matter of reselling existing specimens or new donations given for research purposes. I don’t know where this one came from, but there’s something funny about it.”

This was like pulling teeth. “Anything specific?”

Kiko didn’t answer immediately, but crossed the room to her desk and stopped in front of the Christmas tree beside her laptop. She had brought in the small crooked tree a few days ago, and the

students had playfully decorated it with tiny microfuge tubes filled with colored solutions, intricately cut origami pathogens, and an organic chemistry model to crown the top. She ran a finger over the spiky paper glycoproteins surrounding a virus particle. “There was a kerf mark on the hyoid. It’s not deep, and if the light hadn’t hit it just right, I wouldn’t have seen it. But once I did, I used the flashlight app on my cell for a better look. It’s there all right.”

Matt thought about the small U-shaped bone that hung directly under the lower jaw, just above the Adam’s apple in men and in the equivalent position in women. While it didn’t articulate with any other bone in the body, it was a muscle and ligament attachment point connecting the soft tissues of the mouth, neck, and upper chest. It was also a common osteological indicator of strangulation because it broke easily under direct pressure. But in this case, if it bore a kerf mark . . .

“What kind of kerf mark?” Matt asked. When her face clouded, he held up a placating hand. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, I’m just looking for more details.”

“Obviously, I didn’t have time to unwire the bone and examine at it under the scope, but from a quick look, I’d say a knife, non-serrated. It’s on the upper left side, moving diagonally down the anterior surface. It doesn’t look like a processing artifact from defleshing the bones.”

“That’s usually done by bath because they want the bones to be pristine.” Matt ran his index finger from the left side of his throat to his right in a slight downward diagonal. “You think the throat was cut?”

Kiko shrugged, both hands spread wide. “Have I totally lost it?”

“You’re reading the evidence and using deductive reasoning to extrapolate cause. It’s what we do.” He reached for his phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling Leigh. I need to run this by her.”

Kiko tipped her head forward into her hands to cover her face. “She’ll think I’m crazy. As it was, I stewed over this all day

yesterday trying to talk myself out of talking to you.”

Matt paused, one finger hovering over the key to speed dial Leigh. “Do you think you’re wrong?”

A quiet sigh. “No. I just wish I’d taken a picture of it. By the time I finished looking at it, Cyn was coming down the hall and I had to move fast so she didn’t know I’d been snooping.”

“Then calling Leigh is the right thing to do.” He dialed her number and waited until she picked up. “Hey, it’s me.”

There was a smile in her voice. “Hey ‘me’.”

“How are you feeling today?”

“Better. Thanks for spending so much of the weekend with me and being there when I needed to sound off.”

“Happy to. You’ve certainly done the same for me. Look, this actually isn’t a social call. I have a business question for you.”

“Police business?” The two words were full of curiosity.

“Yeah. What would need to happen if we think we’ve found a murder victim, but aren’t one hundred percent sure?”

“*What?*” There was a mumbled curse and then a long pause. “Okay, I just pulled over before I drove off the road. What did you find?”

“It wasn’t me, it was Kiko, and it might be a suspicious death.” He quickly recapped Kiko’s tale. “What do you think?”

“First of all, it’s not my jurisdiction. That’s Middlesex County. You need the Middlesex Detective Unit.”

“I don’t know the Middlesex Detective Unit. I know you.”

An exasperated sigh came through the line. “Truth to be told, you don’t know you have a victim, either. You can’t call this in yet, Matt. You need to see it. *You*, not one of the students.”

“You want me to get into Sharpe’s lab?”

“Is that a problem?”

“He’s not going to invite me in, let me tell you. We’ll have to get in at some point when Sharpe isn’t around.”

“Can you do it?”

Matt looked up at Kiko, who stood by his desk, staring down at him. “Can we do it? Get in unseen? Leigh says I have to attest to the damage. But if Sharpe sees me, it’s game over for our little

expedition and possibly the evidence. On top of that, I could be fired from BU and you could be expelled from the program. You need to be sure.”

“I’m sure and we can do it. Let me start with a fact-finding mission to find out when the lab might be empty, and we’ll give it a try.”

“It’s a go,” Matt said to Leigh. “God help us, we’re actually going to break into the research lab of my top competitor. Wish us luck.”