

KATHY REICHS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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FASCINATING SCIENCE . . .
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—Jeffery Deaver

BREAK NO BONES

A NOVEL

KATHY
REICHS

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1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

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Originally published in hardcover in 2006 by Scribner

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-4416-6

ISBN-10: 1-4165-4416-X

This Pocket Books export edition March 2007

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A version of "From the Forensic Files of Kathy Reichs" previously appeared in the November 28, 2005, issue of *TV Guide*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their willingness to help, and for the knowledge and support they provided, I owe thanks to many.

Ted Rathbun, Ph.D., University of South Carolina, Columbia (retired), provided information on South Carolina archaeology. Robert Dillon, Ph.D., College of Charleston, gave guidance on malacology. Lee Goff, Ph.D., Chaminade University, is, and will always be, the guru of bugs.

Detective Chris Dozier, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, coached me on the use of AFIS. Detective John Appel, Guilford County, North Carolina, Sheriff's Department (retired), and Detective Investigator Joseph T. Noya, Jr., NYPD Crime Scene Unit, helped with police minutiae.

Linda Kramer, R.N., Michelle Skipper, M.B.A., and Eric Skipper, M.D., helped with the non-Hodgkins lymphoma scenario.

Kerry Reichs kept me accurate on Charleston geography. Paul Reichs provided information on legal proceedings and offered useful comments on early versions of the manuscript.

Others helped but prefer to remain anonymous. You know who you are. Thanks a million.

J. Lawrence Angel was one of the grand old men of forensic anthropology. His chapter on the Spanish windlass and vertebral fracture really does exist: Angel, J. L., and P. C. Caldwell, "Death by strangulation: a forensic anthropological case from Wilmington, Delaware," in *Human Identification: Case Studies in Forensic Anthropology*, eds. T. A. Rathbun and J. E. Buikstra (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1986).

Heartfelt thanks to my editor, Nan Graham. *Break No Bones* benefited greatly from your advice. Thanks also to Nan's assistant, Anna deVries. And thanks to Susan Sandon, my editor across the pond.

Last, but far from least, thanks to my agent, Jennifer Rudolph-Walsh, who always has time for a word of encouragement. And who always makes me feel smart. And pretty.

Though *Break No Bones* is a work of fiction, I have tried to keep details of the story honest. If there are mistakes, I own them. Don't blame the folks acknowledged above.

1

NEVER FAILS. YOU'RE WRAPPING UP THE OPERATION when someone blunders onto the season's big score.

OK. I'm exaggerating. But it's damn close to what happened. And the final outcome was far more disturbing than any last-minute discovery of a potsherd or hearth.

It was May 18, the *second*-to-the-last day of the archaeological field school. I had twenty students digging a site on Dewees, a barrier island north of Charleston, South Carolina.

I also had a journalist. With the IQ of plankton.

"Sixteen bodies?" Plankton pulled a spiral notebook as his brain strobed visions of Dahmer and Bundy. "Vics ID'd?"

"The graves are prehistoric."

Two eyes rolled up, narrowed under puffy lids. "Old Indians?"

"Native Americans."

"They got me covering dead Indians?" No political correctness prize for this guy.

"They?" Icy.

"The *Moultrie News*. The East Cooper community paper."

Charleston, as Rhett told Scarlett, is a city marked by the genial grace of days gone by. Its heart is the Peninsula, a district of antebellum homes, cobbled streets, and outdoor markets bounded by the Ashley and Cooper rivers. Charlestonians define their turf by these waterways. Neighborhoods are referred to as "West Ashley" or "East Cooper," the latter including Mount Pleasant, and three islands, Sullivan's, the Isle of Palms, and Dewees. I assumed plankton's paper covered that beat.

"And you are?" I asked.

"Homer Winborne."

With his five-o'clock shadow and fast food paunch, the guy looked more like Homer Simpson.

"We're busy here, Mr. Winborne."

Winborne ignored that. "Isn't it illegal?"

"We have a permit. The island's being developed, and this little patch is slated for home sites."

"Why bother?" Sweat soaked Winborne's hairline. When he reached for a hanky, I noticed a tick cruising his collar.

"I'm an anthropologist on faculty at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. My students and I are here at the request of the state."

Though the first bit was true, the back end was a stretch. Actually, it happened like this.

UNCC's New World archaeologist normally con-

ducted a student excavation during the short summer term each May. In late March of this year, the lady had announced her acceptance of a position at Purdue. Busy sending out résumés throughout the winter, she'd ignored the field school. Sayonara. No instructor. No site.

Though my specialty is forensics, and I now work with the dead sent to coroners and medical examiners, my graduate training and early professional career were devoted to the not so recently deceased. For my doctoral research I'd examined thousands of prehistoric skeletons recovered from North American burial mounds.

The field school is one of the Anthropology Department's most popular courses, and, as usual, was enrolled to capacity. My colleague's unexpected departure sent the chair into a panic. He begged that I take over. The students were counting on it! A return to my roots! Two weeks at the beach! Extra pay! I thought he was going to throw in a Buick.

I'd suggested Dan Jaffer, a bioarchaeologist and my professional counterpart with the medical examiner/coroner system in the great Palmetto State to our south. I pleaded possible cases at the ME office in Charlotte, or at the Laboratoire de sciences judiciaires et de médecine légale in Montreal, the two agencies for which I regularly consult.

The chair gave it a shot. Good idea, bad timing. Dan Jaffer was on his way to Iraq.

I'd contacted Jaffer and he'd suggested Dewees as an excavation possibility. A burial ground was slated for destruction, and he'd been trying to forestall the

bulldozers until the site's significance could be ascertained. Predictably, the developer was ignoring his requests.

I'd contacted the Office of the State Archaeologist in Columbia, and on Dan's recommendation they'd accepted my offer to dig some test trenches, thereby greatly displeasing the developer.

And here I was. With twenty undergraduates. And, on our thirteenth and penultimate day, plankton-brain.

My patience was fraying like an overused rope.

"Name?" Winborne might have been asking about grass seed.

I fought back the urge to walk away. Give him what he wants, I told myself. He'll leave. Or, with luck, die from the heat.

"Temperance Brennan."

"Temperance?" Amused.

"Yes, *Homer*."

Winborne shrugged. "Don't hear that name so much."

"I'm called Tempe."

"Like the town in Utah."

"Arizona."

"Right. What kind of Indians?"

"Probably Sewee."

"How'd you know stuff was here?"

"Through a colleague at USC-Columbia."

"How'd he know?"

"He spotted small mounds while doing a survey after the news of an impending development was announced."

Winborne took a moment to make notes in his spiral. Or maybe he was buying time to come up with his idea of an insightful question. In the distance I could hear student chatter and the clatter of buckets. Overhead, a gull cawed and another answered.

"Mounds?" No one was going to short-list this guy for a Pulitzer.

"Following closure of the graves, shells and sand were heaped on top."

"What's the point in digging them up?"

That was it. I hit the little cretin with the interview terminator. Jargon.

"Burial customs aren't well known for aboriginal Southeastern coastal populations, and this site could substantiate or refute ethnohistoric accounts. Many anthropologists believe the Sewee were part of the Cusabo group. According to some sources, Cusabo funerary practices involved defleshing of the corpse, then placement of the bones in bundles or boxes. Others describe the scaffolding of bodies to allow decomposition prior to burial in common graves."

"Holy crap. That's gross."

"More so than draining the blood from a corpse and replacing it with chemical preservatives, injecting waxes and perfumes and applying makeup to simulate life, then interring in airtight coffins and vaults to forestall decay?"

Winborne looked at me as though I'd spoken Sanskrit. "Who does that?"

"We do."

"So what are you finding?"

"Bones."

"Just bones?" The tick was now crawling up Winborne's neck. Give a heads-up? Screw it. The guy was irritating as hell.

I launched into my standard cop and coroner spiel. "The skeleton paints a story of an individual. Sex. Age. Height. Ancestry. In certain cases, medical history or manner of death." Pointedly glancing at my watch, I followed with my archaeological shtick. "Ancient bones are a source of information on extinct populations. How people lived, how they died, what they ate, what diseases they suffered—"

Winborne's gaze drifted over my shoulder. I turned.

Topher Burgess was approaching, various forms of organic and inorganic debris pasted to his sunburned torso. Short and plump, with knit cap, wire rims, and muttonchop sideburns, the kid reminded me of an undergraduate Smee.

"Odd one intruding into three-east."

I waited, but Topher didn't elaborate. Not surprising. On exams, Topher's essays often consisted of single-sentence answers. Illustrated.

"Odd?" I coaxed.

"It's articulated."

A complete sentence. Gratifying, but not enlightening. I curled my fingers in a "give me more" gesture.

"We're thinking intrusive." Topher shifted his weight from one bare foot to another. It was a lot to shift.

"I'll check it out in a minute."

Topher nodded, turned, and trudged back to the excavation.

"What's that mean, 'articulated'?" The tick had reached Winborne's ear and appeared to be considering alternate routes.

"In proper anatomical alignment. It's uncommon with secondary burials, corpses put into the ground after loss of the flesh. The bones are usually jumbled, sometimes in clumps. Occasionally in these communal graves one or two skeletons will be articulated."

"Why?"

"Could be a lot of reasons. Maybe someone died immediately before closure of a common pit. Maybe the group was moving on, didn't have time to wait out decomposition."

A full ten seconds of scribbling, during which the tick moved out of sight.

"Intrusive. What's that mean?"

"A body was placed in the grave later. Would you like a closer look?"

"It's what I'm living for." Putting hanky to forehead, Winborne sighed as if he were onstage.

I crumbled. "There's a tick in your collar."

Winborne moved faster than it seemed possible for a man of his bulk to move, yanking his collar, doubling over, and batting his neck in one jerk. The tick flew to the sand and righted itself, apparently used to rejection.

I set off, skirting clusters of sea oats, their tasseled heads motionless in the heavy air. Only May, and already the mercury was hitting ninety. Though I love the Lowcountry, I was glad I wouldn't be digging here into the summer.

I moved quickly, knowing Winborne wouldn't keep

up. Mean? Yes. But time was short. I had none to waste on a dullard reporter.

And I was conscience-clear on the tick.

Some student's boom-box pounded out a tune I didn't recognize by a group whose name I didn't know and wouldn't remember if told. I'd have preferred seabirds and surf, though today's selections were better than the heavy metal the kids usually blasted.

Waiting for Winborne, I scanned the excavation. Two test trenches had already been dug and refilled. The first had yielded nothing but sterile soil. The second had produced human bone, early vindication of Jaffer's suspicions.

Three other trenches were still open. At each, students worked trowels, hauled buckets, and sifted earth through mesh screens resting on sawhorse supports.

Topher was shooting pictures at the easternmost trench. The rest of his team sat cross-legged, eyeing the focus of his interest.

Winborne joined me on the cusp between panting and gasping. Mopping his forehead, he fought for breath.

"Hot day," I said.

Winborne nodded, face the color of raspberry sherbet.

"You OK?"

"Peachy."

I was moving toward Topher when Winborne's voice stopped me.

"We got company."

Turning, I saw a man in a pink Polo shirt and khaki pants hurrying across, not around, the dunes. He was

small, almost child-size, with silver-gray hair buzzed to the scalp. I recognized him instantly. Richard L. "Dickie" Dupree, entrepreneur, developer, and all-around sleaze.

Dupree was accompanied by a basset whose tongue and belly barely cleared the ground.

First a journalist, now Dupree. This day was definitely heading for the scrap heap.

Ignoring Winborne, Dupree bore down on me with the determined self-righteousness of a Taliban mullah. The basset hung back to squirt a clump of sea oats.

We've all heard of personal space, that blanket of nothing we need between ourselves and others. For me, the zone is eighteen inches. Break in, I get edgy.

Some strangers crowd up close because of vision or hearing. Others, because of differing cultural mores. Not Dickie. Dupree believed nearness lent him greater force of expression.

Stopping a foot from my face, Dupree crossed his arms and squinted up into my eyes.

"Y'all be finishing tomorrow, I expect." More statement than question.

"We will." I stepped back.

"And then?" Dupree's face was birdlike, the bones sharp under pink, translucent skin.

"I'll file a preliminary report with the Office of the State Archaeologist next week."

The basset wandered over and started sniffing my leg. It looked to be at least eighty years old.

"Colonel, don't be rude with the little lady." To me. "Colonel's getting on. Forgets his manners."

The little lady scratched Colonel behind one mangy ear.

"Shame to disappoint folks because of a buncha ole Indians." Dupree smiled what he no doubt considered his "Southern gentleman" smile. Probably practiced it in the mirror while clipping his nose hairs.

"Many view this country's heritage as something valuable," I said.

"Can't let these things stop progress, though, can we?"

I did not reply.

"You do understand my position, ma'am?"

"Yes, sir. I do."

I abhorred Dupree's position. His goal was money, earned by any means that wouldn't get him indicted. Screw the rain forest, the wetlands, the seashore, the dunes, the culture that was here when the English arrived. Dickie Dupree would implode the Temple of Artemis if it stood where he wanted to slap up condos.

Behind us, Winborne had gone still. I knew he was listening.

"And what might this fine document say?" Another Sheriff of Mayberry smile.

"That this area is underlain by a pre-Columbian burial ground."

Dupree's smile wavered, held. Sensing tension, or perhaps bored, Colonel abandoned me for Winborne. I wiped my hand on my cutoffs.

"You know those folks up in Columbia well as I do. A report of that nature will shut me down for some time. That delay will cost me money."

"An archaeological site is a nonrenewable cultural

resource. Once it's gone, it's gone forever. I can't in good conscience allow your needs to influence my findings, Mr. Dupree."

The smile dissolved, and Dupree eyed me coldly.

"We'll just have to see about that." The veiled threat was little softened by the gentle, Lowcountry drawl.

"Yes, sir. We will."

Pulling a pack of Kools from his pocket, Dupree cupped a hand and lit up. Chucking the match, he drew deeply, nodded, and started back toward the dunes, Colonel waddling at his heels.

"Mr. Dupree," I called after him.

Dupree stopped, but didn't turn to face me.

"It's environmentally irresponsible to walk on dunes."

Flicking a wave, Dupree continued on his way.

Anger and loathing rose in my chest.

"Dickie not your choice for Man of the Year?"

I turned. Winborne was unwrapping a stick of Juicy Fruit. I watched him put the gum in his mouth, daring with my eyes that he toss the paper as Dupree had tossed his match.

He got the message.

Wordlessly, I hooked a one-eighty and walked to three-east. I could hear Winborne scrabbling along behind me.

The students fell silent when I joined them. Eight eyes followed as I hopped down into the trench. Topher handed me a trowel. I squatted, and was enveloped by the smell of freshly turned earth.

And something else. Sweet. Fetid. Faint, but undeniable.

An odor that shouldn't be there.

My stomach tightened.

Dropping to all fours, I examined Topher's oddity, a segment of vertebral column curving outward from halfway up the western wall.

Above me, students threw out explanations.

"We were cleaning up the sides, you know, so we could, like, take photos of the stratigraphy."

"We spotted stained soil."

Topher added some brief detail.

I wasn't listening. I was troweling, creating a profile view of the burial lying to the west of the trench. With each scrape my apprehension was heading north.

Thirty minutes of work revealed a spine and upper pelvic rim.

I sat back, a tingle of dread crawling my scalp.

The bones were connected by muscle and ligament.

As I stared, the first fly buzzed in, sun iridescent on its emerald body.

Sweet Jesus.

Rising, I brushed dirt from my knees. I had to get to a phone.

Dickie Dupree had a lot more to worry about than the ancient Sewee.