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SPIDER BONES

A NOVEL

**KATHY
REICHS**

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For
Henry Charles Reichs
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“Until They Are Home”

The motto of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command

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1

THE AIR SMELLED OF SUN-WARMED BARK AND apple buds raring to blossom and get on with life. Overhead, a million baby leaves danced in the breeze.

Fields spread outward from the orchard in which I stood, their newly turned soil rich and black. The Adirondacks crawled the horizon, gaudy bronze and green in the glorious sunlight.

A day made of diamonds.

The words winged at me from a war drama I'd watched on the classic-film channel. Van Johnson? No matter. The phrase was perfect for the early May afternoon.

I'm a Carolina girl, no fan of polar climes. Jonquils in February. Azaleas, dogwoods, Easter at the beach. Though I've worked years in the North, after each long, dark, tedious winter the beauty of Quebec spring still takes me by surprise.

The world was sparkling like a nine-carat rock.

A relentless buzzing dragged my gaze back to the corpse at my feet. According to SQ Agent André Ban-

dau, now maintaining as much distance as possible, the body came ashore around noon.

News telegraphs quickly. Though it was now barely three, flies crawled and swarmed in a frenzy of feeding. Or breeding. I was never sure which.

To my right, a tech was taking pictures. To my left, another was running yellow crime-scene tape around the stretch of shoreline on which the body lay. The jackets of both said *Service de l'identité judiciaire, Division des scènes de crime*. Quebec's version of CSI.

Ryan sat in a squad car behind me, talking to a man in a trucker cap. Lieutenant-déetective Andrew Ryan, Section des crimes contre la personne, Sûreté du Québec. Sounds fancy. It's not.

In la Belle Province, crime is handled by local forces in major cities, by the provincial police out in the boonies. Ryan is a homicide detective with the latter, the SQ.

The body was spotted in a pond near the town of Hemmingford, forty-five miles south of Montreal. Hemmingford. Boonies. SQ. You get it.

But why Ryan, a homicide dick working out of the SQ's Montreal unit?

Since the deceased was plastic-wrapped and wearing a rock for a flipper, the local SQ post suspected foul play. Thus the bounce to Ryan.

And to me. Temperance Brennan, forensic anthropologist.

Working out of the Laboratoire de sciences judiciaires et de médecine légale in Montreal, I do the decomposed, mummified, mutilated, dismembered, and skeletal for the province, helping the coroner with identification, cause of death, and postmortem interval.

Immersion leaves a corpse in less than pristine condition, so when Ryan caught the call about a floater, he enlisted me.

Through the windshield I saw Ryan's passenger gesture with agitated hands. The man was probably fifty, with gray stubble and features that suggested a fondness for drink. Black and red letters on his cap declared *I Love Canada*. A maple leaf replaced the traditional heart icon.

Ryan nodded. Wrote something in what I knew was a small notebook.

Refocusing on the corpse, I continued jotting in my own spiral pad.

The body lay supine, encased in clear plastic, with only the left lower leg outside and exposed. Duct tape sealed the plastic under the chin and around the left calf.

The exposed left foot wore a heavy biker boot. Above its rim, a two-inch strip of flesh was the color of oatmeal.

A length of yellow polypropylene rope looped the boot roughly halfway up its laces. The rope's other end was attached to a rock via an elaborate network of knots.

The victim's head was wrapped separately, in what looked like a plastic grocery bag. A black tube protruded from one side of the bag, held in place with more duct tape. The whole arrangement was secured by tape circling the neck and the tube's point of exit.

What the flip?

When I dropped to a squat, the whining went mongo. Shiny green missiles bounced off my face and hair.

Up close, the smell of putrefaction was unmistakable. That was wrong, given the vic's packaging.

Waving off *Diptera*, I repositioned for a better view of the body's far side.

A dark mass pulsed in what I calculated was the right-thigh region. I shooed the swarm with one gloved hand.

And felt a wave of irritation.

The right lower was visible through a fresh cut in the plastic. Flies elbowed for position on the wrist and moved upward out of sight.

Sonofabitch.

Suppressing my annoyance, I shifted to the head.

Algae spread among the folds and creases of the bag covering the top and back of the skull. More slimed one side of the odd little tube.

I could discern murky features beneath the translucent shroud. A chin. The rim of an orbit. A nose, bent to one side. Bloating and discoloration suggested that visual identification would not be an option.

Rising, I swept my gaze toward the pond.

Nosed to the shore was a tiny aluminum skiff with a three-horsepower outboard engine. On the floor in back were a beer cooler, a tackle box, and a fishing rod.

Beside the skiff was a red canoe, beached and lying on its starboard side. *Navigator* was lettered in white below the port gunwale.

Polypropylene rope ran from a knot on the canoe's midship thwart to a rock on the ground. I noted that the knots on the rock resembled the one securing the victim's ankle weight.

Inside the canoe, a paddle lay lengthwise against the starboard hull. A canvas duffel was wedged below the

stern seat. A knife and a roll of duct tape were snugged beside the duffel.

An engine hum joined the buzz of flies and the bustle and click of techs moving around me. I ignored it.

Five yards up the shoreline, a rusted red moped sat beneath a precociously flowering tree. The license plate was unreadable from where I stood. At least with my eyes.

Dual rearview mirrors. Kickstand. Raised trunk behind the seat. The thing reminded me of my freshman undergrad wheels. I'd loved that scooter.

Walking the area between the skiff and the moped, I saw a set of tire treads consistent with the pickup parked by the road, and one tread line consistent with the moped itself. No foot or boot prints. No cigarette butts, aluminum cans, condoms, or candy wrappers. No litter of any kind.

Moving back along the water, I continued recording observations. The engine sounds grew louder.

Mud-rimmed pond, shallow, no tides or chop. Apple trees within five feet of the bank. Ten yards to a gravel road accessing Highway 219.

Tires crunched. The engine sounds cut out. Car doors opened, slammed. Male voices spoke French.

Satisfied I'd learn nothing further from the scene, and wanting a word with the industrious Agent Bandau, I turned and walked toward the vehicles lining the road.

A black van had joined Ryan's Jeep, the blue crime-scene truck, the fisherman's pickup, and Bandau's SQ cruiser. Yellow letters on the van said *Bureau du coroner*.

I recognized the van's driver, an autopsy tech named Gilles Pomerleau. Riding shotgun was my new assistant, Roch Lauzon.

Exchanging bonjours, I assured Pomerleau and Lauzon the wait wouldn't be long. They crossed to view the corpse. Ryan remained in the cruiser with the unfortunate angler.

I approached Bandau, a gangly twentysomething with a wheat blond mustache and skin that looked like it really hated sun. Though it was hidden by his agent's cap, I envisioned pale hair going south at a rate that alarmed its young owner.

"What's with the plastic wrap?" Bandau asked in French, looking past me toward the corpse.

"Good question." I had no explanation.

"Male or female?"

"Yes," I said.

Bandau's face came around, winking my reflection off his aviator shades. My expression was not a happy one.

"I understand you were the first responder."

Bandau nodded, eyes unreadable behind the dark lenses.

"How'd that go?"

Bandau cocked his chin toward his cruiser. "Local named Gripper found the vic. Claims he was fishing when he saw the canoe. He motored over to investigate, something snagged his propeller. Says he paddled in, saw his catch was a corpse, dialed nine-one-one on his cell. While waiting, he dragged the body ashore then retrieved the canoe."

"Thorough guy."

"Guess you could say that."

"Is he believable?" I asked.

Bandau shrugged. *Who knows?*

"What are his creds?"

“Lives on avenue Margaret with his wife. Works maintenance at the wildlife park.”

Hemmingford is located in the Montérégie region, a hair from the Canada-U.S. border. The Montérégie is noted for apples, maple syrup, and Parc Safari, a combination drive-through nature preserve and amusement park.

When I first started commuting to Quebec, the media were following the story of a group of rhesus monkey escapees from the park. I had visions of the band belly-crawling south through the night to avoid border patrol, risking all for a green card and a better life. Twenty years later, the image still amuses me.

“Go on,” I said.

“I caught the call around noon, drove out, secured the area.”

“And printed the body.” Chilly.

Sensing my disapproval, Bandau spread his feet and thumb-hooked his belt. “I thought it might speed the ID.”

“You cut the plastic.”

“I wore gloves.” Defensive. “Look, I had the new camera, so I shot close-ups and transmitted the file electronically.”

“You compromised the scene.”

“What scene? The guy was bobbing in a pond.”

“The flies will chip in to buy you a beer. Especially the ladies. They’re ovipositing with glee as we speak.”

“I was trying to help.”

“You broke protocol.”

Bandau’s lips tightened.

“What happened with the prints?”

"I got ridge patterning on all five digits. Someone at the post sent the file to CPIC. From there it went into both NCIC and the New York State system."

CPIC is the Canadian Police Information Centre, a computerized index of criminal justice information. NCIC is the U.S. equivalent, the FBI's National Crime Information Center.

"Why send the prints south?"

"Being on the border, we get a lot of Americans coming through. And the scooter has a New York plate."

Not bad, Bandau.

Hearing a car door slam, we both turned.

Ryan was walking toward us. Released for the moment, Gripper was leaning on his pickup, looking uneasy.

Ryan nodded to Bandau, spoke to me.

"What do you think?"

"Guy's dead."

"Guy?"

"Based solely on size."

"How long?"

"Tough to say. Given this week's warm temperatures, and the shrink-wrap, I'd guess a day or two. There's some decomp, but not much." I cast a meaningful glance at Bandau. "That'll change now that the bugs have been issued a gate pass."

I told Ryan what Bandau had done.

"What kind of rookie move was that?"

Bandau's cheeks went raspberry.

"That's no way to make it up the chain, son."

Ryan turned back to me.

"Twenty-four to forty-eight hours tracks with the

wit's account. Gripper says he comes out here on his days off, usually Tuesdays and Thursdays. Swears day before yesterday the pond was canoe and corpse free."

"Algae patterning suggests the body was floating with the head just at or below the waterline," I said.

Ryan nodded. "According to Gripper, the body was hanging head up in the water, with the booted foot attached to a rock lying on the bottom. He guesses the pond's about eight feet deep where he found the guy."

"Where was the canoe?"

"Beside the vic. Gripper says that's how the rope got tangled in his outboard."

Ryan spoke to Bandau. "Check for feedback on those prints."

"Yes, sir."

Ryan and I watched Bandau lope toward his cruiser.

"Probably DVR's cop shows," Ryan said.

"Not the right ones," I said.

Ryan glanced toward the body, back to me.

"What do you think?"

"Weird one," I said.

"Suicide? Accident? Murder?"

I spread my palms in a "who knows" gesture.

Ryan smiled. "That's why I bring you along."

"The vic probably kept the canoe at the pond and drove the moped back and forth."

"Back and forth from where?"

"Beats me."

"Yep. Can't do without you."

A wood thrush trilled overhead. Another answered. The cheerful exchange was in stark contrast to the grim conversation below.