

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE FACE OF DECEPTION*

IRIS JOHANSEN

THE
KILLING
GAME



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C H A P T E R

O N E

Talladega Falls, Georgia

January 20

6:35 A.M.

THE SKELETON HAD been in the ground for a long time. Joe Quinn had seen enough of them to recognize that. But how long?

He turned to Sheriff Bosworth. "Who found it?"

"Two hikers. They stumbled on it late last night. Those rains the past few days washed it out of the ground. Hell, that storm slid half the mountain into the falls. A real gully washer." His gaze narrowed on Joe's face. "You must have hotfooted up here from Atlanta as soon as you heard about it."

"Yes."

"You think it's connected to one of the Atlanta PD's cases?"

"Maybe." He paused. "No. This is an adult."

"You're looking for a kid?"

"Yes." Every day. Every night. Always. He shrugged. "The initial report didn't say whether it was an adult or a child."

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Bosworth bristled. “So? I never have to make reports like this. We’re pretty crime free here. Not like Atlanta.”

“You knew enough to recognize possible knife wounds to the skeleton’s rib cage. But I do admit our problems are a little different. What’s your population?”

“Don’t come up here and slam me, Quinn. We’ve got a strong law enforcement body. We don’t need any city cops messing around our jurisdiction.”

He’d made a mistake, Joe thought wearily. He hadn’t slept in nearly twenty-four hours, but that was no excuse. It was always an error to criticize local police even when they were taking potshots at you. Bosworth was probably a good cop, and he’d been polite until Joe cast aspersions on how he did his job. “I’m sorry. No offense.”

“I do take offense. You have no idea what our problems are here. Do you know how many tourists we have every year? And how many get lost or hurt in these mountains? We may not have murderers or drug dealers, but we take care of every one of our citizens besides those tenderfeet who come up from Atlanta and camp in our parks and fall down in gorges and mess up—”

“Okay, okay.” Joe held up his hand in surrender. “I said I was sorry. I didn’t mean to downplay your problems. I guess I’m a little jealous.” His gaze wandered out over the mountains and the falls. Even with Bosworth’s men climbing all over, taping and scouring the area, it was still unbelievably beautiful. “I’d like to live here. It would be nice to wake up every morning to all this peace.”

Bosworth was slightly appeased. “It’s God’s country. The Indians used to call the falls ‘the place of tumbling moonlight.’ ” He scowled. “And we don’t find skeletons like this. This must be one of yours. Our people don’t kill each other and toss the bodies into the ground.”

“Perhaps. It’s a long way to transport a body. But in this wilderness, it would be quite a while before a corpse is discovered.”

Bosworth nodded. “Hell, if it hadn’t been for the rains and the mud slide, we might not have found it for twenty, thirty years.”

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“Who knows? It might be that long already. I’ll get out of your way. I’m sure your medical examiner will want to get at the bones and examine them.”

“We have a coroner. He’s the local undertaker.” Bosworth added quickly, “But Pauley’s always willing to ask for help when he needs it.”

“He’ll need it. If I were you, I’d make a formal request to our pathology department. They’re usually willing to cooperate.”

“Could you do it for us?”

“I can’t. I’ll be glad to put in a word, but I’m here in an unofficial capacity.”

Bosworth frowned. “You didn’t say that. You just flashed your badge and started asking me questions.” His eyes suddenly widened. “My God, you’re Quinn.”

“It’s no secret. I told you that.”

“But I didn’t make the connection. I’ve been hearing about you for years. The skeleton man. Three years ago you were over in Coweta County checking out two skeletons found there. Then there was that body found in the swamps near Valdosta. You were down there too. And that skeleton up near Chattanooga that you—”

“Word does get around, doesn’t it?” Joe smiled sardonically. “I’d think you’d have better things to talk about. So? Do the stories make me some kind of urban legend?”

“No, just a curiosity. You’re looking for those kids, aren’t you? The ones Fraser killed and then refused to tell where he’d buried them.” He frowned. “That was almost ten years ago. I’d think you’d give up.”

“Their parents haven’t given up. They want their children home for proper burial.” He looked down at the skeleton. “Most victims belong to someone somewhere.”

“Yeah.” Bosworth shook his head. “Kids. I never understand why anyone would kill a kid. It makes me sick.”

“Me too.”

“I’ve got three kids. I guess I’d feel the same way those parents do. God, I hope I never find out.” Bosworth was silent a moment. “Those cases must have been closed when Fraser was executed. It’s mighty decent of you to keep trying to find those children on your own time.”

One child. Eve’s child. “It’s not decent. It’s just something I’ve got to do.” He turned away. “Thanks for putting up with me, Sheriff. Call me if I can act as liaison between your coroner and the Atlanta PD.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

He started down the cliff and then stopped. To hell with not offending another law officer. The sheriff was clearly out of his depth, and by the time someone knowledgeable came on the scene, it might be too late to save the evidence. “Could I make a couple of suggestions?”

Bosworth stared at him warily.

“Get someone out here to photograph the body and entire crime scene.”

“I was going to do that.”

“Do it now. I know your guys are doing their best to locate evidence, but they’re probably destroying more than they’re finding. A metal detector should be used in case there’s any evidence covered by the mud. And get a forensic archaeologist to excavate the skeleton and an entomologist to examine any dead insects or larvae. It’s probably too late for the entomologist, but you can never tell.”

“We don’t have any of those people on our staff.”

“You can hire them from a university. It may save you from having egg on your face later.”

Bosworth thought about it and then said slowly, “Maybe I’ll do that.”

“It’s up to you.” Joe continued down the hill toward his car parked on the gravel road below.

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Another blank; it had been a long shot anyway. But he'd had to check it out. He had to check them all out. Someday he'd get lucky and find Bonnie. He had to find her. He had no choice.

BOSWORTH STARED AFTER Quinn as he walked down the hill. Not a bad guy. A little too cool and contained, but maybe that went with dealing with those scumbags in the city. Thank God, he didn't have any weirdos out here. Just good people trying to lead a good life.

The skeleton man. He hadn't told the truth. Quinn was more of a legend than a curiosity. He had once been an FBI agent but had quit the Bureau after Fraser was executed. He was now a detective with the Atlanta PD and supposedly a good cop. Tough as nails and squeaky clean. These days it was hard for city cops not to give in to temptation. That was one of the reasons Bosworth stayed in Rabun County. He never wanted to experience the cynicism and disillusionment he had seen in Quinn's face. He couldn't be forty yet, but he looked as if he had gone to hell and back.

Bosworth glanced down at the skeleton. This was the kind of thing Quinn faced on a daily basis. Hell, he even went looking for it. Well, let him have it. Bosworth would be glad to get rid of the skeleton. It wasn't fair for his people to be drawn into this nasty—

His walkie-talkie buzzed and he pressed the button. "Bosworth."

"QUINN!"

Joe looked over his shoulder at Bosworth at the top of the cliff. "What?"

"Come back up here. My deputy just radioed me that my men on the far ridge have found more bodies." He paused. "Well, skeletons."

Joe tensed. "How many?"

Bosworth's plump face had paled in the early morning light, and

he looked dazed. "Eight, so far. He thinks one of them is a little kid."

THEY HAD FOUND the Talladega bodies.

Dom turned off the television set and leaned back in his chair to consider the ramifications.

As far as he knew, this was the first time any of his kills had been discovered. He had always been very careful and methodical, always going the extra mile. In this case many extra miles. Those had all been Atlanta kills and he had transported the bodies to what had been his favorite graveyard then.

Now they had been found, not through diligent search but by an accident of nature.

Or an act of God?

Any religious fanatic would say that God's hand had uncovered those bodies to bring him to justice.

He smiled. Screw all those holier-than-thou fanatics. If there was a God, he looked forward to taking him on. It might be the challenge he needed just then.

The Talladega skeletons were little threat. By the time of those murders, he had learned enough not to leave a hint of evidence. If there had been any mistakes, the rain and mud had probably erased them.

He hadn't been as careful in the early days. The thrill had been too intense, the fear too vivid. He'd even picked his victims at random to make the kill more uncertain. He was long past such foolishness. But he'd been so methodical lately that the excitement was dwindling. If the excitement went away, then so did his reason for living.

He quickly blocked the thought. He'd gone through this before. He just had to remember that the satisfaction came from the kill

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itself. Everything else was a plus. If he needed a challenge he'd choose someone harder, someone with ties, someone who was loved and would be missed.

As for the discovery at Talladega, he must look on it only as an interesting development, something to watch with amusement and curiosity as the law struggled to put together the pieces.

Who had been the kills at Talladega? He vaguely remembered a blond prostitute, a homeless black man, a teenager selling his body on the streets . . . and the little girl.

Funny, but until that moment he'd completely forgotten about the little girl.

Pathology Department

Atlanta

Five days later

"The child was seven or eight, female, and probably Caucasian." Ned Basil, the medical examiner, read from the report on his desk, which had come from Dr. Phil Comden, a forensic anthropologist at Georgia State. "That's all we know, Quinn."

"How long had she been in the ground?"

"Uncertain. Possibly between eight and twelve years."

"Then we have to find out more."

"Look, it's not our problem. The skeletons were found in Rabun County. The chief stretched a point to even get a forensic anthropologist to examine these bones."

"I want you to recommend facial reconstruction."

Basil had known that was coming. The moment they'd brought in the kid's skeleton, it was a given. "It's not our problem."

"I'm making it our problem. Nine bodies were found in Talladega. I'm asking for reconstruction on only one."

"Look, Chief Maxwell doesn't want to be drawn into this mess.

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She'd only turn me down. She allowed you to bring the child's body here because she knew that all the missing-children groups would be on her ass if she didn't make the token effort."

"I need more than a token effort. I need to know who this child is."

"Didn't you hear me? It's not going to happen. Why don't you give up?"

"I need to know who she is."

Jesus, Quinn was relentless. Basil had run into him a few times before, and the detective had always interested him. On the surface he appeared quiet, easy, almost lazy, but Basil had always been aware of his razor-sharp intelligence and alertness. He'd heard somewhere that Quinn was an ex-SEAL, and he could believe it.

"No recommendation, Quinn."

"Change your mind."

He shook his head.

"Have you ever done anything wrong, Basil?" Quinn asked softly. "Something you wouldn't want anyone to know?"

"What are you getting at?"

"If you have, I'll dig until I find it."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yes. I'd offer you money, but I don't think you'd take it. You're pretty honest . . . as far as I know. But everyone has something to hide. I'll find it and I'll use it."

"You son of a bitch."

"Just make the recommendation, Basil."

"I haven't done anything that—"

"Lied on your income tax? Let an important report slide by because you were overworked?"

Dammit, everyone lied on their income tax form. But municipal employees could be booted out on their ass for that. How could Quinn find out about—

He'd find out. Basil's lips tightened. "I suppose you want me to recommend the forensic sculptor too?"

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“Yes.”

“Eve Duncan.”

“You bet.”

“There’s no betting about it. Everyone in the department knows it’s her kid you’ve been looking for all these years. The chief won’t go for that either. Duncan’s too high-profile after that political cover-up case she worked on. Reporters would be climbing all over the place if she was brought in.”

“It’s been over a year. That makes Eve old news. I’d work it out.”

“Isn’t she somewhere in the South Pacific now?”

“She’d come back.”

Basil knew Eve Duncan would come back. Everyone at the Atlanta PD was familiar with her story. A young girl who had borne an illegitimate child and then fought her way out of the slums against enormous odds. She was nearly finished with college and was on her way to a decent life, when she had been struck by the cruelest blow. Her daughter, Bonnie, had been murdered by a serial killer and her body had never been found. Fraser, her killer, had been executed without revealing the location of any of the bodies of the twelve children he’d confessed to killing. Since that time Eve had dedicated herself to finding other lost children, alive and dead. She had gone back to school, gotten a degree in fine arts from Georgia State, and become a top forensic sculptor. She had qualified in age progression and superimposition, earning a superior reputation in both.

“Why are you hesitating?” Quinn asked. “You know damn well she’s the best.”

Basil couldn’t deny that. She had helped the department out on many occasions. “She carries a hell of a lot of baggage. The media will go—”

“I said I’d take care of it. Recommend her.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Quinn shook his head. “Now.”

"The department won't pay to fly her back."

"I'll do it. Just put through the recommendation."

"You're pushing, Quinn."

"It's one of my finest talents." His lips lifted in a sardonic smile.
"But you won't even feel the bruise."

He wasn't so sure. "It's a waste of my time. Chief Maxwell will never go for it."

"She'll go for it. I'll tell her that I'll release your recommendation to the press if she doesn't. It will be a question of letting Eve work on the skull in privacy or have the media asking the chief why she's not doing everything possible to solve the little girl's murder."

"She'll can your ass."

"I'll risk it."

It was clear he'd risk anything to get his way in this matter. Basil shrugged. "Okay, I'll do it. It will be a pleasure to see you kicked out on your ear."

"Good." Quinn headed for the door. "I'll be back in an hour to pick up the recommendation."

"I'm going to lunch. Make it two hours." A minor victory, but he'd take anything he could get. "You think it's the Duncan kid, don't you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"And you want her mother to work on the skull? You bastard. What if it is Bonnie Duncan? What the hell do you think that will do to her mother?"

The only answer was the door closing behind Quinn.

An island south of Tahiti

Three days later

He was coming.

Her heart was beating hard, fast. She was too excited. Eve Duncan drew a deep breath as she watched the helicopter settle on the

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tarmac. Good heavens, you'd think she was waiting for the angel Gabriel. It was only Joe.

Only? Her friend, her companion through the nightmare that had almost torn her apart, one of the anchors of her life. And she hadn't seen him in over a year. Dammit, she had a right to be excited.

The door was opening and he was getting out of the aircraft. God, he looked tired. His face was almost always without expression and, to anyone unfamiliar with it, impossible to read. But she knew that face. From a thousand different situations she had memorized every glance, every tightening of the mouth, the little secret signs that told so much. There were new deep lines graven on either side of his mouth, and his square face was a little pale.

Yet his eyes were the same.

And the smile that lit his face when he saw her . . .

"Joe . . ." She ran into his arms. Safety. Familiarity. Togetherness. All was right with the world.

He held her tightly for a minute and then pushed her back and dusted a kiss over the bridge of her nose. "You have a few freckles. Have you been using your sunscreen?"

Protective. Bossy. Caring. Two minutes, and they were back where they were when she'd left him all those months before. She grinned up at him as she adjusted her wire-rimmed glasses. "Of course, but it's hard not to get a little sun here."

He studied her up and down. "You look like a beachcomber in those shorts." He tilted his head. "And relaxed. Not totally relaxed but not wound up tight as you were the last time I saw you. Logan's been taking good care of you."

She nodded. "He's been very kind to me."

"And what else?"

"Don't be so nosy. It's none of your business."

"That means you're sleeping with him."

"I didn't say that. But what if I am?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. You were in pretty bad shape after what you went through with that last reconstruction. It's entirely natural for you to have drawn close to Logan. A billionaire who whisked you away from the media to his own island in the South Pacific? I'd be surprised if you hadn't fallen into his bed and even more surprised if he hadn't made sure you would."

"I don't fall into anyone's bed. I make a choice." She shook her head. "Now, stop picking on Logan. You always were like pit bulls with each other." She led him toward the Jeep. "And he's going to be your host while you're here, so you might as well be civil."

"Maybe."

"Joe."

He smiled. "I'll try."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Did you see Mom before you left?"

"Yes, she sent you her best. She misses you."

Eve wrinkled her nose. "Not much. She's too involved with Ron. Did she tell you they're going to be married in a few months?"

He nodded. "How do you feel about that?"

"How do you expect me to feel? I couldn't be happier for her. Ron's a nice guy and Mom deserves a good relationship. She's had a rough life." That was an understatement. Her mother had grown up in the slums, been addicted to crack for years, and when she was fifteen had brought Eve into the same nightmare world. "It's good she has someone. She's always needed people, and I've always been too busy to give her the attention she should have."

"You did your best. You were always more like a mother than a daughter to her."

"For a long time I was too bitter to do her much good. It was only after Bonnie came that we managed to bridge the gulf." Bonnie. When her daughter had been born, she had changed everything, transformed Eve's whole world and everyone in it. "It will be better for Mom now."