The Devil's Bones

Jefferson Bass

Published by Quercus

Extract

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THE LAST DROP OF DAYLIGHT WAS FADING FROM THE western sky—a draining that seemed more a suffocation than a sunset, a final faint gasp as the day died of heatstroke. To the east, a dull copper moon, just on the downhill side of full, struggled above the crest of the Great Smoky Mountains. From where I stood, in a ridgetop pasture above the confluence of the Holston and French Broad rivers—above the headwaters of the Tennessee—I had a ringside view of the demise of the day and the wavering birth of the night.

Just below the ridge, across the river on Dickinson Island, the lights of the Island Home Airport winked on, etching the runway's perimeter in white and the taxiway in cobalt blue. The main landmarks of downtown Knoxville shimmered a few miles farther downstream—two tall office towers, a wedge-shaped Mayan-looking Marriott, the high bridges spanning the river, and the looming waterfront complex of Baptist Hospital. A

mile beyond those, as the fish swims, lay the University of Tennessee campus and Neyland Stadium, where the UT Volunteers packed in a hundred thousand football fans every game. Football season would kick off with a night game in three weeks, and the stadium's lights were ablaze tonight, in some sort of preseason scrimmage against the darkness. The lights loomed high above the field; a series of additions to the stadium—an upper deck and skyboxes—had taken the structure higher and higher into the sky; another expansion or two and Neyland Stadium would be the city's tallest skyscraper. The lights themselves were almost blinding, even at this distance, but the water softened their reflection to quicksilver, turning the Tennessee into a dazzling, incandescent version of Moon River. It was stunning, and I couldn't help thinking that even on an off-season night Neyland Stadium was still the tail that wagged Knoxville.

Tucked beneath the stadium, along a curving corridor that echoed its ellipse, was UT's Anthropology Department, which I'd spent twenty-five years building from a small undergraduate major to one of the world's leading Ph.D. programs. A quarter mile long and one room wide, Anthropology occupied the outer side of the stadium's dim, windowless second-floor hallway. Mercifully, the classrooms and labs and graduate-student offices did possess windows, though the view was a bizarre and grimy one, consisting mainly of girders and cross braces—the framework supporting those hundred thousand foot-stomping football fans in the bleachers, keeping them from crashing down amid the countless human bones shelved beneath them.

Many of the bones catalogued in the bowels of Neyland Stadium had arrived by way of the Anthropology Research Facility—

the Body Farm—a three-acre patch of wooded hillside behind UT Medical Center. At any given moment, a hundred human corpses were progressing from fresh body to bare bones there, helped along by legions of bacteria and bugs, plus the occasional marauding raccoon or possum or skunk. By studying the events and the timing as bodies decomposed under a multitude of experimental conditions—nude bodies, clothed bodies, buried bodies, submerged bodies, fat bodies, thin bodies, bodies in cars and in sheds and in rolls of scrap carpeting—my graduate students and colleagues and I had bootstrapped the Body Farm into the world's leading source of experimental data on both what happens to bodies after death and when it happens. Our body of research, so to speak, allowed us to pinpoint time since death with increasing precision. As a result, any time police—police anywhere—asked for help solving a real-world murder, we could check the weather data, assess the degree of decomposition, and give an accurate estimate of when the person had been killed.

Tonight would yield a bit more data to the scientific literature and a few hundred more bones to the collection. We were conducting this experiment miles from the Body Farm, but I had brought the Farm with me—two of its inhabitants anyhow—to this isolated pasture. I couldn't conduct tonight's research so close to downtown, the UT campus, and the hospital. I needed distance, darkness, and privacy for what I was about to do.

I turned my gaze from the city's glow and studied the two cars nestled in the high grass nearby. In the faint light, it was hard to tell they were rusted-out hulks. It was also difficult to discern that the two figures behind the steering wheels were corpses: wrecked bodies driving wrecked cars, on what was about to become a road trip to hell.

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THE TOW-TRUCK driver who had brought the vehicles out to the UT Ag farm a few hours before—minus their cadaverous drivers—clearly thought I was crazy. "Most times," he'd said, "I'm hauling cars like this *to* the junkyard, not *from* the junkyard."

I smiled. "It's an agricultural experiment," I'd said. "We're transplanting wrecks to see if a new junkyard takes root."

"Oh, it'll take root all right," he said. "I guaran-damn-tee you. Word gets out there's a new dump here, you'll have you a bumper crop of cars and trucks and warshin' machines before you know it." He spit a ropy stream of tobacco juice, which rolled across the dirt at his feet and then quivered dustily for a moment. "Shit, I know all *kinds* of folks be glad to help with *that* experiment."

I laughed. "Thanks anyhow," I said. "Actually, I lied. We are doing an experiment, but it's not agricultural, it's forensic. We're going to cremate a couple of bodies in these cars and study the burned bones."

He eyed me suspiciously, as if I might be about to enlist him forcibly as one of the research subjects, but then his face broke into a leathery grin. "Aw, hell, you're that bone-detective guy, ain't you? Dr. Bodkin?"

"Brockton"— I smiled again—"but that's close enough."

"I knew you looked familiar. My wife's a big fan of all them forensic shows on TV. She talks about donating her body to you'uns. But I don't think I could hardly handle that."

"Well, no pressure," I said. "We can use all the bodies we can get, but we're getting plenty. Nearly a hundred and fifty a year now. We'll put her to good use if she winds up with us, but we'll be fine if she doesn't."

He eyed the bed of my pickup truck, which was covered by a fiberglass cover. "You got them bodies yonder in the back of your truck?"

I shook my head. "If I did," I said, "you'd see a huge swarm of flies around it. Hot as it is, you'd be smelling something, too. We'll wait till the last minute to bring them out here. And we'll use a UT truck, not mine."

He nodded approvingly—I might be crazy, I could see him thinking, but at least I wasn't dumb enough to stink up my own truck. After unloading the cars from the bed of the wrecker, he'd given me a big wave and a couple of toots of the horn as he drove away. If he told the tale well to his forensic-fan wife over dinner, I suspected, he might be able to persuade her to donate her body to *him* tonight.

"I'M STILL shocked we're replicating something that happened at the Latham farm." Miranda Lovelady, my research assistant of the past four years, edged up beside me in the twilight. "I've been in that barn a dozen times and been in the house two or three. I always liked Mary Latham. Hard to believe she died in a car fire."

"Apparently the D.A. has a hard time believing it, too," I said, "since he personally called both me and Art to look into it. You never told me how you knew the Lathams."

"It was during my brief career as a veterinary student," she said. "Mary was friends with some of the vet-school faculty, and she liked to throw parties out at the farm. I got on her guest list somehow. Or her husband's." Her voice took on a slight edge when she mentioned the husband—now the widower.

"You don't sound too fond of him," I said, hoping she'd elaborate. She did.

"I had to fight him off in a horse stall once," she said.

"Jesus," I said, "he tried to rape you?"

"No, nowhere near that bad," she said. "He made a pass at me, and he didn't want to take no for an answer." She fell silent, and I had the feeling there was more to the story than she was telling. "He was a jerk, but he wasn't dangerous. At least, I didn't think so. But maybe I was wrong."

"I might wish I hadn't asked," I said, "but what were you doing in a horse stall with him?"

Another pause. "It was a vet-school party," she said. "The animals were part of the guest list. And *no*," she said sharply, "I don't mean it *that* way. The beer keg was always in the barn. There'd be bowls of apple slices to feed the horses." Despite the darkness, I glimpsed a smile. "I still half-expect to smell hay and hear horses nickering whenever I smell beer." The smile faded. "It was a lot of fun. Until it wasn't." She shook her head, as if shaking off a bug or a bad memory.

"When's the last time you saw the Lathams?"

"Her, right after I switched to anthro; him, about a year later. I quit going to their parties, and he showed up at the bone lab one day. Said he wanted to make sure I knew I was always welcome at the farm. Anytime, he said." She nodded toward the cars. "We all set here?"

"I think so," I said. "Let me check with Art." I looked around and finally spotted Art Bohanan's dark form half hidden by the lone tree in the pasture. "Art!" I yelled. "Mind your manners—there's a lady present."

"Oh, sorry," he called back, stepping away from the tree and

tugging up his zipper. "I thought it was just you and Miranda." He pointed at the tree. "I was just making sure this fine botanical specimen won't catch fire."

"Very eco-friendly of you, pig," said Miranda.

"That's 'Officer Pig' to you," said Art pleasantly. Like me, he'd long since learned to enjoy Miranda's sarcasm, since it was tempered by forensic smarts, a tireless work ethic, and a big heart. Besides, Art had an equally sizable streak of smart-ass himself. His East Tennessee roots had infused him with a down-home sense of fun. His three decades of crime-scene and crime-lab experience—he was the Knoxville Police Department's senior criminalist—had added a dark, gallows topspin to the hillbilly humor. Working with Art practically guaranteed a Leno-like monologue of deadpan jokes about murders, suicides, and extreme fingerprinting techniques. ("Give me a hand, Bill," he'd once said at a crime scene; he was asking me to amputate a murder victim's right hand so he could rush it to the lab for fingerprinting.) To someone unaccustomed to daily doses of death and brutality, our humor might have sounded shocking, but Art—like Miranda, and like me—took his work seriously. It was only himself and his colleagues he took lightly. It made the bleakness bearable.

"Okay," I said, "we've got both bodies in position, we've got an amputated leg in each backseat, we've poured two gallons of gasoline into both passenger compartments, we've hosed down the area till it's the only patch of mud within a hundred miles, and we've got the water truck standing by with another five hundred gallons just in case. Anything I've forgotten?"

"You've forgotten to explain why it is we had to wait till my bedtime to get started," said Art. "It's not like the night's all nice and cool for us. It's still ninety, easy, and if that moon burns off

some of this haze, it could get back up to ninety-five here pretty soon."

"It's not the heat," I said to Miranda, "it's the stupidity. You want to explain it to Sherlock here?"

"Sure, boss," she said. "I live to serve." She turned to Art. "Our primary objective, of course, is to incinerate all the soft tissue, so we end up with nothing but burned bones—comparable to the ones in the case you're working."

"I understand that," said Art, "and I do appreciate it. No, really. But don't dem bones burn just as good in the daytime as they do in the dark? Or is there something you osteologist types know that we mere mortals are not privy to?"

"Many things, grasshopper," said Miranda. "The bodies and bones *burn* just as well in the daytime, but they don't *photograph* near as well, and we want to document the process in detail." She pointed to the four tripods and digital video cameras we'd set up beside the vehicles. One camera was aimed through each vehicle's windshield, another through each driver's window. "If we did this during the day, the video would show nothing but smoke. Lit from the outside, by the sun, the smoke steals the show. Lit from within, by the flame, the tissue shows up clear as a bell while it burns away."

"I knew that," said Art.

"I know you knew," said Miranda. "You were just checking to make sure *I* did. Right?"

"Right." Despite the slight grumbling about the late start, I knew that Art was glad to be out here, rather than bent over a computer screen swapping chat messages with pedophiles. Six months earlier he'd been given the unenviable assignment of creating the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force,

dedicated to ferreting out sexual predators who trolled the Web for young victims. Since then he'd spent countless hours posing as "Tiffany," a fourteen-year-old girl who loved to chat online. Although Art took pride in catching and arresting the sort of men who preyed on the Tiffanys of this world, he found the work sad, stressful, and dispiriting. So getting permission to work even one old-fashioned murder case—something he found wholesome by comparison to pedophilia—was a welcome break for him.

"Okay, you two," I said, "a little less conversation, a little more incineration."

Miranda fished around in a pocket of her jumpsuit. "Rock and roll," she said. She flicked a disposable lighter, and a jet of flame appeared at the tip. She swayed like a drunk or a stoner, waving the lighter, and sang, *"SMOKE on the WA-ter, a FIE-uhr IN the sky-y."*

I laughed. "Aren't you a little young to know that song, missy? That's from back in my heyday."

"My grandpa used to play it on the Victrola," she said, "whenever he grilled up a woolly mammoth he'd clubbed." She grinned, and her teeth shone golden in the glow of the flame.

"Very funny," I said. "Remind me to laugh on the way back to the old folks' home."

"Ouch," she said, but she wasn't smarting from my snappy retort. She took her thumb off the trigger, and the flame died.

"Serves you right," I said. "Okay, let's get some data." I walked toward one of the cars, and Miranda headed to the other. Fishing a book of paper matches from one pocket, I lit one—it took three tries to get enough friction from the tiny strip at the base of the book—then used that match to set off the rest. The matchbook

erupted in a fusillade of flame, flaring bigger than I'd expected, and I reflexively flung it through the open window of the car. The gas-soaked upholstery ignited with a flash and a whoosh, and I wondered if I'd been too liberal with the accelerant. I also wondered, as I felt the heat searing my face, if I had any eyebrows left.

Through the rush and crackle of the growing fire, I caught the drone of an airplane overhead. A small plane, just off the runway from the nearby airport, banked in our direction. As it circled, the flash of its wingtip strobes illuminated the smoke from the burning cars in bursts, like flash grenades, minus the boom. I tried to wave them off, but if they could even see me, they ignored my frantic gestures.

Backing away from my vehicle, I glanced over at the other car, also engulfed in flames. Despite the intensity of the inferno, Miranda stood barely ten feet from the car, one arm shielding her face, a look of utter fascination in her eyes. I forced my way through the blast of heat and took her by the arm. "You're too close," I shouted over the hiss and roar of the fire.

"But look!" she shouted back, never moving her eyes, pointing into the vehicle at the figure slumped in the driver's seat. I looked just in time to see the skin of the forehead peel slowly backward, almost like an old-fashioned bathing cap. As it continued to peel backward, I realized that what I was seeing was a scalping. A scalping done by fire, not by knife.

"Very interesting!" I yelled. "But you're still too close. That's what we've got the video cameras for. This is dangerous."

As if to underscore my point, a thunderous boom shook the air. Miranda yelped, and I instinctively wrapped both arms around her and tucked my head. I saw a puff of smoke from one

of the tires—the heat had increased the pressure and weakened the rubber to the bursting point. Miranda and I scurried to join Art in the shelter of the water truck. "I hope you took off the gas tanks," Art shouted, "or filled them up with water!"

"Why?"

"In case there's any gas left. You don't want any vapors," he said.

"Since they came from the junkyard—" I began, but I didn't get to finish the sentence. Just then the gas tank of the car Miranda had been standing beside exploded, and pellets of hot glass rained down on us like some infernal version of hailstones. The car's spare tire—launched from the trunk by the blast—arced toward the water truck, slammed into the hood, and smashed through the windshield. *It's going to be a long, hot summer, Bill Brockton,* I said to myself, *and you've got some serious 'splainin' to do.*

The circling airplane beat a hasty retreat into the safety of darkness, and a moment later I heard sirens.