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The Bone Collector

Written by Jeffery Deaver

Published by Hodder

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The BONE COLLECTOR

Jeffery DEAVER



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A Hodder paperback

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For my family, Dee, Danny, Julie, Ethel
and Nelson . . . Apples don't fall far.

And for Diana too.

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Extracts from Rhyme, *Physical Evidence*, 4th Ed. 463

I

KING FOR A DAY

'The present in New York is so powerful that the past is lost.'

JOHN JAY CHAPMAN

Friday, 10:30 P.M., to Saturday, 3:30 P.M.

Chapter ONE

She wanted only to sleep.

The plane had touched down two hours late and there'd been a marathon wait for the luggage. And *then* the car service had messed up; the limo'd left an hour ago. So now they were waiting for a cab.

She stood in the line of passengers, her lean body listing against the weight of her laptop computer. John rattled on about interest rates and new ways of restructuring the deal but all she could think was: Friday night, 10:30. I wanna pull on my sweats and hit the hay.

Gazing at the endless stream of Yellow Cabs. Something about the color and the similarity of the cars reminded her of insects. And she shivered with the creepy-crawly feeling she remembered from her childhood in the mountains when she and her brother'd find a gut-killed badger or kick over a red-ant nest and gaze at the wet mass of squirming bodies and legs.

T.J. Colfax shuffled forward as the cab pulled up and squealed to a stop.

The cabbie popped the trunk but stayed in the car. They had to load their own luggage, which ticked John off. He was

used to people doing things for him. Tammie Jean didn't care; she was still occasionally surprised to find that she had a secretary to type and file for her. She tossed her suitcase in, closed the trunk and climbed inside.

John got in after her, slammed the door and mopped his pudgy face and balding scalp as if the effort of pitching his suitbag in the trunk had exhausted him.

'First stop East Seventy-second,' John muttered through the divider.

'Then the Upper West Side,' T.J. added. The Plexiglas between the front and back seats was badly scuffed and she could hardly see the driver.

The cab shot away from the curb and was soon cruising down the expressway toward Manhattan.

'Look,' John said, 'that's why all the crowds.'

He was pointing at a billboard welcoming delegates to the UN peace conference, which was starting on Monday. There were going to be ten thousand visitors in town. T.J. gazed up at the billboard – blacks and whites and Asians, waving and smiling. There was something wrong about the artwork, though. The proportions and the colors were off. And the faces all seemed pasty.

T.J. muttered, 'Body snatchers.'

They sped along the broad expressway, which glared an uneasy yellow under the highway lights. Past the old Navy Yard, past the Brooklyn piers.

John finally stopped talking and pulled out his Texas Instruments, started crunching some numbers. T.J. sat back in the seat, looking at the steamy sidewalks and sullen faces of people sitting on the brownstone stoops overlooking the highway. They seemed half-comatose in the heat.

It was hot in the cab too and T.J. reached for the button to lower the window. She wasn't surprised to find that it didn't work. She reached across John. His was broken too. It was then that she noticed that the door locks were missing.

The door handles too.

Her hand slid over the door, feeling for the nub of the handle. Nothing – it was as if someone had cut it off with a hacksaw.

'What?' John asked.

'Well, the doors . . . How do we open them?'

John was looking from one to the other when the sign for the Midtown Tunnel came and went.

'Hey!' John rapped on the divider. 'You missed the turn. Where're you going?'

'Maybe he's going to take the Queensboro,' T.J. suggested. The bridge meant a longer route but avoided the tunnel's toll. She sat forward and tapped on the Plexiglas, using her ring.

'Are you taking the bridge?'

He ignored them.

'Hey!'

And a moment later they sped past the Queensboro turnoff.

'Shit,' John cried. 'Where're you taking us? Harlem. I'll bet he's taking us to Harlem.'

T.J. looked out the window. A car was moving parallel to them, passing slowly. She banged on the window hard.

'Help!' she shouted. 'Please . . .'

The car's driver glanced at her once, then again, frowning. He slowed and pulled behind them but with a hard jolt the cab skidded down an exit ramp into Queens, turned into an alley and sped through a deserted warehouse district. They must've been going sixty miles an hour.

'What're you *doing*?'

T.J. banged on the divider. 'Slow down. Where are?—'

'Oh, God, no,' John muttered. 'Look.'

The driver had pulled on a ski mask.

'What do you want?' T.J. shouted.

'Money? We'll give you money.'

Still, silence from the front of the cab.

T.J. ripped open her Targus bag and pulled out her black laptop. She reared back and slammed the corner of the computer into the window. The glass held though the sound of the bang seemed to scare the hell out of the driver. The cab swerved and nearly hit the brick wall of the building they were speeding past.

'Money! How much? I can give you a lot of money!' John sputtered, tears dripping down his fat cheeks.

T.J. rammed the window again with the laptop. The screen flew off under the force of the blow but the window remained intact.

She tried once more and the body of the computer split open and fell from her hands.

'Oh, shit . . .'

They both pitched forward violently as the cab skidded to a stop in a dingy, unlit cul-de-sac.

The driver climbed out of the cab, a small pistol in his hand.

'Please, no,' she pleaded.

He walked to the back of the cab and leaned down, peering into the greasy glass. He stood there for a long time, as she and John scooted backwards, against the opposite door, their sweating bodies pressed together.

The driver cupped his hands against the glare from the streetlights and looked at them closely.

A sudden crack resonated through the air, and T.J. flinched. John gave a short scream.

In the distance, behind the driver, the sky filled with red and blue fiery streaks. More pops and whistles. He turned and gazed up as a huge, orange spider spread over the city.

Fireworks, T.J. recalled reading in the *Times*. A present from the mayor and the UN secretary-general for the conference delegates, welcoming them to the greatest city on earth.

The driver turned back to the cab. With a loud snap he pulled up on the latch and slowly opened the door.

The call was anonymous. As usual.

So there was no way of checking back to see *which* vacant lot the RP meant. Central had radioed, '*He said Thirty-seven near Eleven. That's all.*'

Reporting parties weren't known for Triple A directions to crime scenes.

Already sweating though it was just nine in the morning, Amelia Sachs pushed through a stand of tall grass. She was walking the strip search – what the Crime Scene people called it – an S-shaped pattern. Nothing. She bent her head to the speaker/mike pinned to her navy-blue uniform blouse.

'Portable 5885. Can't find anything, Central. You have a further-to?'

Through crisp static the dispatcher replied, 'Nothing more on location, 5885. But one thing . . . the RP said he hoped the vic was dead. K.'

'Say again, Central.'

'The RP said he hoped the victim was dead. For his sake. K.'

'K.'

Hoped the vic was dead?

Sachs struggled over a wilted chain-link and searched another empty lot. Nothing.

She wanted to quit. Call in a 10–90, unfounded report, and go back to the Deuce, which was her regular beat. Her knees hurt and she was hot as stew in this lousy August weather. She wanted to slip into the Port Authority, hang with the kids and have a tall can of Arizona iced tea. Then, at 11:30 – just a couple of hours away – she'd clean out her locker at Midtown South and head downtown for the training session.

But she didn't – couldn't – blow off the call. She kept

going: along the hot sidewalk, through the gap between two abandoned tenements, through another vegetation-filled field.

Her long index finger pushed into her flattop uniform cap, through the layers of long red hair piled high on her head. She scratched compulsively then reached up underneath the cap and scratched some more. Sweat ran down her forehead and tickled and she dug into her eyebrow too.

Thinking: My last two hours on the street. I can live with it.

As Sachs stepped farther into the brush she felt the first uneasiness of the morning.

Somebody's watching me.

The hot wind rustled the dry brush and cars and trucks sped noisily to and from the Lincoln Tunnel. She thought what Patrol officers often did: This city is so damn loud somebody could come up right behind me, knife-range away, and I'd never know it.

Or line up iron sights on my back . . .

She spun around quickly.

Nothing but leaves and rusting machinery and trash.

Climbing a pile of stones, wincing. Amelia Sachs, thirty-one – a *mere* thirty-one, her mother would say – was plagued by arthritis. Inherited from her grandfather as clearly as she'd received her mother's willowy build and her father's good looks and career (the red hair was anybody's guess). Another jolt of pain as she eased through a tall curtain of dying bushes. She was fortunate to stop herself one pace from a sheer thirty-foot drop.

Below her was a gloomy canyon – cut deep into the bedrock of the West Side. Through it ran the Amtrak roadbed for trains bound north.

She squinted, looking at the floor of the canyon, not far from the railroad bed.

What *is* that?

A circle of overturned earth, a small tree branch sticking out of the top? It looked like—

Oh, my good Lord . . .

She shivered at the sight. Felt the nausea rise, prickling her skin like a wave of flame. She managed to step on that tiny part inside her that wanted to turn away and pretend she hadn't seen this.

He hoped the victim was dead. For his sake.

She ran toward an iron ladder that led down from the sidewalk to the roadbed. She reached for the railing but stopped just in time. Shit. The perp might've escaped, this way. If she touched it she might screw up any prints he'd left. Okay, we do it the hard way. Breathing deeply to dull the pain in her joints, she began climbing down the rock face itself, slipping her issue shoes – polished like silver for the first day of her new assignment – into crevices cut in the stone. She jumped the last four feet to the roadbed and ran to the grave.

'Oh, man . . .'

It wasn't a branch sticking out of the ground; it was a hand. The body'd been buried vertical and the dirt piled on until just the forearm, wrist and hand protruded. She stared at the ring finger; all the flesh had been whittled away and a woman's diamond cocktail ring had been replaced on the bloody, stripped bone.

Sachs dropped to her knees and began to dig.

Dirt flying under her dog-paddling hands, she noticed that the uncut fingers were splayed, stretched beyond where they could normally bend. Which told her that the vic had been alive when the last shovelful of dirt was spooned onto the face.

And maybe still was.

Sachs dug furiously into the loosely packed earth, cutting her hand on a bottle shard, her dark blood mixing into the darker earth. And then she came to the hair and a forehead below it, a cyanotic bluish-gray from the lack of oxygen. Digging

further until she could see the dull eyes and the mouth, which had twisted into a horrible grin as the vic had tried in the last few seconds to stay above the rising tide of black earth.

It wasn't a woman. Despite the ring. He was a heavyset man in his fifties. As dead as the soil he floated in.

Backing away, she couldn't take her eyes off his and nearly stumbled over a railroad track. She could think of absolutely nothing for a full minute. Except what it must've been like to die that way.

Then: Come *on*, honey. You got yourself a homicide crime scene and you're first officer.

You know what to do.

ADAPT

A is for Arrest a known perp.

D is for Detain material witnesses and suspects.

A is for Assess the crime scene.

P is for . . .

What was *P* again?

She lowered her head to the mike. 'Portable 5885 to Central. Further-to. I've got a 10–29 by the train tracks at Three-eight and Eleven. Homicide, K. Need detectives, CS, bus and tour doctor. K.'

'Roger, 5885. Perp in custody, K?'

'No perp.'

'Five-eight-eight-five, K.'

Sachs stared at the finger, the one whittled down to the bone. The incongruous ring. The eyes. And the grin . . . oh, that fucking grin. A shudder ripped through her body. Amelia Sachs had swum among snakes in summer-camp rivers and had boasted truthfully she'd have no problem bungee-jumping from a hundred-foot bridge. But let her think of confinement . . . think of being trapped, immobile, and the panic attack'd grab her like an electric shock. Which was why Sachs walked fast when she walked and why she drove cars like light itself.

When you move they can't getcha . . .

She heard a sound and cocked her head.

A rumble, deep, getting louder.

Scraps of paper blowing along the roadbed of the tracks. Dust dervishes swirling about her like angry ghosts.

Then a low wail . . .

Five-foot-nine Patrol Officer Amelia Sachs found herself facing down a thirty-ton Amtrak locomotive, the red, white and blue slab of steel approaching at a determined ten miles an hour.

'Hold up, there!' she shouted.

The engineer ignored her.

Sachs jogged onto the roadbed and planted herself right in the middle of the track, spread her stance and waved her arms, signaling him to stop. The locomotive squealed to a halt. The engineer stuck his head out the window.

'You can't go through here,' she told him.

He asked her what she meant. She thought he looked woefully young to be driving such a big train.

'It's a crime scene. Please shut off the engine.'

'Lady, I don't see any crimes.'

But Sachs wasn't listening. She was looking up at a gap in the chain-link on the west side of the train viaduct, at the top, near Eleventh Avenue.

That would have been one way to get the body here without being seen – parking on Eleventh and dragging the body through the narrow alley to the cliff. On Thirty-seventh, the cross street, he could be spotted from two dozen apartment windows.

'That train, sir. Just leave it right there.'

'I can't leave it here.'

'Please shut off the engine.'

'We don't shut off the engines of trains like this. They run all the time.'

'And call the dispatcher. Or somebody. Have them stop the southbound trains too.'

'We can't do that.'

'Now, sir. I've got the number of that vehicle of yours.'

'Vehicle?'

'I'd suggest you do it immediately,' Sachs barked.

'What're you going to do, lady? Gimme a ticket?'

But Amelia Sachs was once again climbing back up the stone walls, her poor joints creaking, her lips tasting limestone dust, clay and her own sweat. She jogged to the alley she'd noticed from the roadbed and then turned around, studying Eleventh Avenue and the Javits Center across it. The hall was bustling with crowds – spectators and press. A huge banner proclaimed, *Welcome UN Delegates!* But earlier this morning, when the street was deserted, the perp could easily have found a parking space along here and carried the body to the tracks undetected. Sachs strode to Eleventh, surveyed the six-lane avenue, which was jammed with traffic.

Let's do it.

She waded into the sea of cars and trucks and stopped the north-bound lanes cold. Several drivers tried end runs and she had to issue two citations and finally drag trash cans out into the middle of the street as a barricade to make sure the good residents did their civic duty.

Sachs had finally remembered the next of the first officer's ADAPT rules.

P is for Protect the crime scene.

The sound of angry horns began to fill the hazy morning sky, soon supplemented by the drivers' angrier shouts. A short time later she heard the sirens join the cacophony as the first of the emergency vehicles arrived.

Forty minutes later, the scene was swarming with uniforms and investigators, dozens of them – a lot more than a hit in Hell's Kitchen, however gruesome the cause of death, seemed

to warrant. But, Sachs learned from another cop, this was a hot case, a media groper – the vic was one of two passengers who'd arrived at JFK last night, gotten into a cab and headed for the city. They'd never arrived at their homes.

'CNN's watching,' the uniform whispered.

So Amelia Sachs wasn't surprised to see blond Vince Peretti, chief of the Central Investigation and Resource Division, which oversaw the crime scene unit, climb over the top of the embankment and pause as he brushed dust from his thousand-dollar suit.

She was, however, surprised to see him notice her and gesture her over, a faint smile on his clean-cut face. It occurred to her she was about to receive a nod of gratitude for her *Cliffhanger* routine. Saved the fingerprints on *that* ladder, boys. Maybe even a commendation. In the last hour of the last day of Patrol. Going out in a blaze of glory.

He looked her up and down. 'Patrolwoman, you're no rookie, are you? I'm safe in making that assumption.'

'I'm sorry, sir?'

'You're not a rookie, I assume.'

She wasn't, not technically, though she had only three years' service under her belt, unlike most of the other Patrol officers her age; they had nine or ten years in. Sachs had foundered for a few years before attending the academy. 'I'm not sure what you're asking.'

He looked exasperated and the smile vanished. 'You were first officer?'

'Yessir.'

'Why'd you close down Eleventh Avenue? What were you *thinking* of?'

She looked along the broad street, which was still blocked by her trash-can barricade. She'd gotten used to the honking but realized now it was really quite loud; the line of cars extended for miles.

'Sir, the first officer's job is to arrest a perp, detain any witnesses, protect—'

'I know the ADAPT rule, officer. You closed the street to protect the crime scene?'

'Yessir. I didn't think the perp would park on the cross street. He could be seen too easily from those apartments. See, there? Eleventh seemed like a better choice.'

'Well, it was a wrong choice. There were no footprints on *that* side of the tracks, and two sets going to the ladder that leads up to Thirty-seven.'

'I closed Thirty-seven too.'

'That's my point. That's all that needed to be closed. And the train?' he asked. 'Why'd you stop that?'

'Well, sir. I thought that a train going through the scene might disturb evidence. Or something.'

'Or *something*, officer?'

'I didn't express myself very well, sir. I meant—'

'What about Newark Airport?'

'Yessir.' She looked around for help. There were officers nearby but they were busily ignoring the dressing-down. 'What exactly about Newark?'

'Why didn't you shut that down too?'

Oh, wonderful. A schoolmarm. Her Julia Roberts lips grew taut but she said reasonably, 'Sir, in my judgment, it seemed likely that—'

'The New York Thruway would've been a good choice too. And the Jersey Pike and Long Island Expressway. I-70, all the way to St Louis. Those are likely means of escape.'

She lowered her head slightly and stared back at Peretti. The two of them were exactly the same height, though his heels were higher.

'I've gotten calls from the commissioner,' he continued, 'the head of the Port Authority, the UN secretary-general's office,

the head of that expo—' He nodded toward the Javits Center. 'We've fucked up the conference schedule, a U.S. senator's speech and traffic on the entire West Side. The train tracks were fifty feet from the vic and the street you closed was a good two-hundred feet away and thirty above. I mean, even Hurricane Eva didn't fuck up Amtrak's Northeast Corridor like this.'

'I just thought—'

Peretti smiled. Because Sachs was a beautiful woman – her 'foundering' before attending the academy had involved steady assignments for the Chantelle Modeling Agency on Madison Avenue – the cop chose to forgive her.

'Patrolwoman Sachs' – he glanced at the name tag on her chest, flattened chastely by the American Body Armor vest – 'an object lesson. Crime scene work is a balance. It'd be nice if we could cordon off the whole city after every homicide and detain about three million people. But we can't do that. I say this constructively. For your edification.'

'Actually, sir,' she said brusquely, 'I'm transferring out of Patrol. Effective as of noon today.'

He nodded, smiled cheerfully. 'Then, enough said. But for the record, it *was* your decision to stop the train and close the street.'

'Yessir, it was,' she said smartly. 'No mistake about that.'

He jotted this into a black watch book with slashing strokes of his sweaty pen.

Oh, please . . .

'Now, remove those garbage cans. You direct traffic until the street's clear again. You hear me?'

Without a yessir or nosir or any other acknowledgment she wandered to Eleventh Avenue and slowly began removing the garbage cans. Every single driver who passed her scowled or muttered something. Sachs glanced at her watch.

An hour to go.

I can live with it.