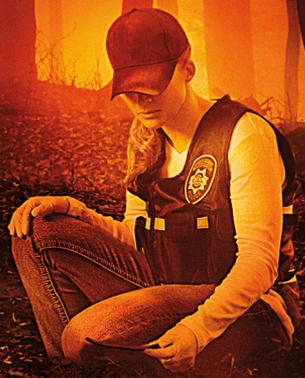


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WOMEN OF JUSTICE

DON'T LOOK BACK



LYNETTE EASON

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W O M E N O F
J U S T I C E

T W O

DON'T
LOOK BACK

LYNETTE EASON



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20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This story is dedicated to Christ, my Lord and Savior,
who allows me to do what I love to do.

The LORD is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?

Psalm 27:1

Tuesday Afternoon

FBI Special Agent Dakota Richards stared down at the pile of bones unearthed by the backhoe. Jamie would have her hands full with this one.

He looked up to see her coming toward him. She was dressed in a Tyvek jumpsuit she'd donned to avoid contaminating the scene. Underneath, he'd bet she had on her standard khaki capris and a white long-sleeved T-shirt. In her right hand, she carried a pair of blue booties she'd place over her red tennis shoes before entering the area.

As always, Dakota's heart gave that extra little beat in response to her presence. And as always, she held herself at a distance even as she came closer.

"Hey, Jamie."

She offered him a small smile as her brown eyes locked on his. "So you pulled this one?"

"I did." He took in her presence. Petite yet wiry, she had her long blonde curls pulled up into her customary ponytail. He cleared his throat. "This is the third body found near this area. Only this one's a skeleton. Connor called me about an hour ago

and said his boss wanted the FBI in on it, and that they might need some of our resources. After looking at the situation, my boss agreed. I knew Serena would request your services." Serena Hopkins, the pathologist and a woman Jamie enjoyed working with. He smiled. "She said you were the perfect person for the job. I agreed."

Her chin rose at his compliment; appreciation shone in her gaze along with a tinge of amusement. "Ha. I'm not sure that means much. I'm the *only* person right now." The other anthropologist she worked with on occasion was on his honeymoon. "You have a partner on this one?"

"Just Connor right now. I'm authorized to call for more help if we need it." Connor Wolfe, former state law enforcement detective, now a detective with the city of Spartanburg, South Carolina, was also Jamie's brother-in-law. Her sister, Samantha, and Connor had married a year and a half ago on Christmas Day, shortly after Jamie's graduation.

"What happened?"

"Two workers were digging a grave and came across a body already buried. Fortunately, that guy over there," he gestured to the Hispanic-looking man sitting on the ground near the backhoe, "saw the bones they'd unearthed and immediately stopped his partner who was driving, so it looks like there won't be any damage to the rest of whatever you might find."

"Bones in a cemetery." She grinned. "Not really unusual, is it?"

"Cute, Jamie."

She turned serious. "Human?"

"You'll have to make that final determination, of course, but yeah, I can see the skull and the outline of what once was a body."

"So, it looks like we've got a homicide?"

"Looks like it. Connor should be back soon. He's talking to the director of the place, but he and I'll be working on this if you concur that it's a homicide. For some reason, they think they'll link the

first two they found here to this one. Guess we'll find out." The first two bodies had been found approximately three years ago very close to this spot. "Anyway, we've got a skeleton in a shallow grave. Usually not a good case for death by natural causes."

"Usually not. Are we thinking serial killer?"

"Maybe. I wasn't working here when the other two bodies were found, and the detective that did work them is now in another state."

"So you rushed right over. Didn't have anything better to do, huh?" She teased him and he smiled back.

"Naw." They both knew he had an overflowing desk full of cases he was working on.

As Jamie slipped on a pair of gloves, then tugged the sleeves back down to the edge of her palms, Dakota couldn't help notice the brief flash of scars around her wrists. She always wore long sleeves no matter the weather.

But she'd never told him why.

And he'd never told her he'd fallen in love with her practically from the moment they'd met a little less than two years ago when he'd been helping her sister and Connor with the case of missing and murdered teenagers.

Since then he'd been trying to win this lady's heart. Thus far, he'd failed miserably and didn't have a clue what he was doing wrong.

"All right," she turned toward the grave, "let's see what we've got."



Jamie ignored the thumping of her heart that Dakota's presence always seemed to incite and turned her attention to her job. His dark curly hair, keen blue eyes, Stetson, cowboy boots, and Texas drawl combined to make him one attractive man. The problem was, she didn't know what to do with her reaction to him, so she pretended it wasn't there.

They were working in an open field, property that belonged to the mortuary but hadn't been used as graves yet.

Part of the excavation team Jamie worked with on a regular basis had already dug down around the skeleton so that they could stand upright in the grave next to the bones that now lay on a dirt platform.

Normally, they would place the bones on a gurney and transport it to the morgue; however, in this case, the body hadn't been lying down when it had been buried, it had been dropped into a hole sitting up. The bones rested on top of each other, looking like one big lump. And Jamie could see what others couldn't.

Her crew knew the bones were not to be disturbed until she had a chance to see them exactly as they were found. And looking down into the grave, she could see the spine lying facedown. The skull lay just in front of the spine like it had dropped off the end. All of this lay on top of what had probably once been thighs. The ribs were perfectly proportioned, still attached to the spine by some desiccated tissue. The right arm, which included the humerus, radius, and ulna, lay across the back of the spine.

The left arm was missing—the bones that the Bobcat had clipped and pulled out of the grave, to the horror of the workers. It was amazing the machine hadn't disturbed the rest of the skeleton—or completely destroyed it.

Jamie felt someone approaching and stepped to the opposite side of the grave. She liked her space. She shot a smile at the curly-headed crime scene photographer who stood at the edge. "Hey, Chase, have you gotten all the pictures?"

A shock of red hair covered his left eye as he nodded. "I got them."

"Great. Now, I guess it's my turn."

Looking down into the hole was one thing; getting into it was another. She started her anxiety-calming exercises. Abdominal breaths, not chest breathing. One, two, three. Okay.

It had been a long time since the last panic attack and she

wasn't about give in now. Time to see what she was made of. Jamie dropped down into the grave. Stood there for a number of seconds, smelling the dampness of the earth, feeling the darkness surround her. Remembered the pain, the mind-numbing fear . . .

Shut it out. Let it go. It doesn't control you anymore. You control it.

She shuddered, then focused on the one thing that would take her mind off her fear.

The bones.

Two hours later, she had her documentation on paper, and with her help, the team brought up what looked to be an entire skeleton jigsaw puzzle. As Jamie supervised the transfer of the bones to various boxes, the rest of the team returned to the grave and continued to sift through the debris looking for any more small fragments or missing pieces.

Jamie picked up a large bone and, using a soft brush, swished it over the piece. "It's a left femur." The largest bone in the body.

"Any clothing found with it?" Dakota said, walking up beside her. She gave a small jump at his sudden appearance, then went back to her bone. He looked over her shoulder.

"A polyester shirt. Remnants of a pair of pants and some other things that will have to be examined back at the lab."

She set the bone back into the box that would go back to her lab for her to unpack. Then she'd work on putting this person back together to see if they could come up with an identity.

"We're checking the area to see if anything else turns up."

"You don't think this is an isolated incident?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Since this is the third body to be found under suspicious circumstances, I just want to see if anything unusual catches my eye. I always tend to scout farther than just where the body is found."

Settling a hand on her hip, she scanned the area and said, "Ok, I'll come with you."



They walked the perimeter of the cemetery first, then made their way through it, walking a grid pattern.

"You see anything out of place?" she asked him.

"No."

"Just from my initial observation I can tell those bones have been there awhile."

"That was my impression."

"So you have learned something from me in the last year and a half or so, huh?"

"I try." He pretended modesty.

She flashed him a grin, then turned to scan the gently sloping grass that stretched out before them. Land that would one day be used to bury the deceased—the way they were supposed to be buried, not someone digging a hole in the ground and trying to hide his crime.

"Any other observations? Anything else that could indicate murder?" He wanted to hear what she thought. Listening to someone else sometimes helped him organize thoughts in his mind.

"Besides the fact that a body's buried in a place it shouldn't be and without a coffin?"

He grinned at her teasing.

She turned serious. "The way the bones were situated says a lot." She described them to him. "The body was dropped into that hole, hands bound behind her."

"Her?"

"The first thing I looked for. The shape of the pelvis and a few other things."

"Right. And the hands were bound behind her?"

Jamie nodded. "I could tell because the right arm bones were lying across the back of the spine and not under it. At least that's my theory until further examination."

She paused and Dakota watched her gaze land on a spot near the edge of the trees. Dread twisted her features as she headed to the area. "Uh-oh. I was wondering if I would see an area like that but hoped I wouldn't."

He followed her and stopped when she held a hand out in front of him.

“What is it?”

She pointed to the ground. “You know as well as I do that statistics show that if a killer kills more than once, he buries the bodies in the same general location. Sometimes, not always. But because the possibility exists, it’s always smart to cover your bases.”

“Exactly. And?”

“And I bet there’s another body buried right here.”

“Huh? How do you figure that? Did you go psychic on me now?” In confusion, he stared at the ground. In his many years as an investigator, he’d learned a lot about dead bodies and forensics but hadn’t developed the skill of locating graves just by looking at the ground.

When he said he wanted to take a look around, he’d just meant he was looking for a disturbed area, anything that might indicate someone had been doing something they shouldn’t, a clue that might lead him to the reason someone buried a body here. Not that he’d really expected to find anything. It was obvious a lot of time had passed since the person in the grave had been put there, but . . .

Jamie gave a small, sad laugh and said, “No, not psychic, just more observant than the average person. I need another grid set up, marked off in twenty-foot sections with string and wooden stakes. We need some more of those workhorses and plywood, too, to set up tables with sifting screens for going through the debris. I’ll need my camera guys over here and—”

Dakota held up a hand. “Hang on there. What makes you think there’s another body here?”

“The ground.”

“Could you explain?”

“It’s sunken in right here.” She walked the perimeter of the area she was talking about, then pointed to the center. “Then there’s another small depression in the middle.”

“Uh-huh. And how does that add up to a dead body?”

“Okay,” her voice took on the tone of teacher, “say a guy kills someone and he wants to get rid of the body by burying it. He comes out here, sees an open field, digs a grave as fast as he can, then sticks the body in it. It’s going to be rather shallow because he’s in a hurry.”

“Wouldn’t someone see that the ground’s been disturbed and wonder why?”

Jamie looked around. “We’re in a pretty secluded area. Far enough away from the mortuary building that anyone happening to look out a window wouldn’t see anything. The perimeter of the entire backside of this cemetery is surrounded by trees so no one driving by can see what’s going on.” She shrugged. “Who’s going to notice? And besides, maybe our killer didn’t care if he—or she—was found, although burying the body suggests he didn’t want it found immediately.” She threw her hands up. “Who knows?”

Dakota nodded. “Okay, but you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Right. So, our victim is buried and the ground covered back up. What happens to the body over time?”

“It decomposes.”

“Right again. As the body decomposes, the ground sinks.”

Realization dawned in his eyes. “So, what’s up with the second indentation?”

“The body cavity. When all the gases are gone, the ground sinks one more time.”

Dakota sighed and stared at the innocent-looking patch of grass. “If there’s one body buried around here, I suppose it’s possible there’s another.”

“Hey, guys,” the call came from the grave behind them, then a head popped up above the edge, “check this out.”



Jamie looked over to see Roxanne, criminalist and grave digger extraordinaire, hold up a plastic bag containing a pair of dirt-encrusted handcuffs.

A chill shot through her as the memory flashed to the forefront of her mind. *He yanked her arms behind her; the cold steel snapped closed over her wrists. His masked faced shoved against hers as he whispered vile things in her ear. A swish to the side, she spun her head. Nothing. No one. Just the man behind her. The brush of rose petals against her cheek, falling to the pillow, the floor. Low, taunting laughter. The whisper, "She loves me, she loves me not . . ."*

Breathlessness came over her as her chest closed in on her lungs. Her heart hammered against her breastbone and the blue sky spun above. She jammed a hand into her pocket and closed her fingers around the small metal object she always kept with her.

A hand on her arm made her jump and it was all she could do to hold in the scream clawing at her throat.

"Jamie!"

She gasped and looked into Dakota's worried eyes. Blinking, she stumbled back and sat on the cool ground. Someone's grave. A grave that could have been hers. She buried her head in her hands and fumbled for an explanation that wouldn't have him calling the men in the white coats to come lock her up in the loony bin.

Sucking in a deep breath, she looked up. "Sorry, I just felt really dizzy there for a minute."

"You looked terrified."

A half-laugh croaked from her. "Sorry. I'm sorry." She couldn't seem to stop apologizing. "I don't know what happened." Yes, she did but wasn't about to explain it. Not now. Maybe not ever. She pulled in a lungful of oxygen and shoved herself up into a standing position. She had a job to do. "I'm all right now."

Uncertainty flickered on Dakota's face as he stepped back without protest.

He now held the bag containing the handcuffs and Jamie shuddered.

She hated handcuffs.



The Hero, as he'd come to think of himself, gave a victorious smile and lowered the high-powered binoculars to his lap. She still thought of him. Her reaction to the handcuffs proved it.

Only now, he was tired of watching. He'd been watching her ever since he'd come across the article in the newspaper a little over nine months ago. It had been almost nine months old. A paper saved to line the bottom of the bird cage or start a fire in the fireplace.

Jamie had gotten her doctorate and she'd been in the paper holding her diploma.

Jamie. The one who'd gotten away.

Anger tightened his gut. He couldn't believe she'd had the nerve to survive, the strength to thwart him. But no matter. He reined in the anger.

He could hear the voice in his head, chanting. "Stop the pain, stop the pain. Only you can stop the pain." He shook his head.

It was time.

Time for the fun to begin.

Time to let Jamie Cash know her hero had returned and he was ready to renew their relationship.

He put the binoculars away and cranked the car.

The clock on the dash glared at him, reminding him he had an appointment in fifteen minutes. He'd have to hurry. After all, it wouldn't do for someone known for his punctuality to show up late. But after that . . .

He had a stop to make before Jamie got home.