

# THE BONE CHAMBER

by  
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## Chapter One

Sydney Fitzpatrick pulled out a small scale model of a crime scene from the metal cabinet at the front of the classroom, then eyed the clock by the classroom door. Nine-forty. Twenty more minutes and her Friday was officially kick-starting—once the students left and she completed the final paperwork. This was the last segment of a two-week forensic art course at the FBI Academy with twenty-five law enforcement would-be artists from around the country. “Here,” she said, setting the model on the table at the front of the class, “we have an interesting *and* controversial case. It dates back to the 1970s, before computers were all the rage in re-creating crime scenes, but it offers a good example of how a forensic artist can—”

She stopped when the classroom door opened. Special Agent in Charge Terrance Harcourt poked his head in the doorway. “You have a minute?”

“Sure.” She excused herself to the men and women, then stepped from the room. Harcourt, a man in his fifties, gray-haired, dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar, sleeves rolled to his forearms, stood next to a man she’d never seen. He was taller than Harcourt, was maybe her age, mid-thirties, with a dark suit, a crisp tie, and a stance that screamed federal agent of the anal sort, she thought, closing the door tightly so that their conversation wouldn’t be overheard.

“Sorry to interrupt your class,” Harcourt said. “This is Special Agent Zachary Griffin. And this, of course, is our resident forensic artist, Special Agent Sydney Fitzpatrick.”

“Good to meet you,” Griffin said, shaking her hand.

“A pleasure,” Sydney said. “What can I do for you?”

“I heard you were the go-to girl when it comes to recommending forensic anthropologists,” Griffin said. “I know there are a few on the east coast, but my case is too important to draw one out of a hat. I was hoping if I gave you a wish list, you could give me a name.”

“Depends,” she said, glancing into the classroom—not that she expected her students to be throwing spit wads. Cops were, however, notorious pranksters. “What’s your wish list?”

“Fast, reliable, the best in his or her field, and experienced in working with forensic artists.”

“I know of two offhand. One in Vermont, one in D.C.”

“The D.C. area would be more convenient.”

“That would be Dr. Natasha Gilbert.”

“How well do you know her?”

“We’re good friends. I’ve worked a number of cases with her. If you want experience, she’s the one.”

“Any chance you can dig up her number?”

“You have pen and paper? I’ll write it down for you.”

He gave her a pen and small pad from his suit coat pocket. “And when might you be available for the sketch?” he asked, when she gave him the number.

No doubt Harcourt hadn’t told him her plans. Or maybe, in typical federal agent style, SA Griffin hadn’t asked her boss, just assumed she’d be available. “If you can wait until *after* Thanksgiving, I’m yours.”

“That’s two weeks from now. We’re on a tight schedule.”

“Unfortunately, as much as I’d love to work with Tasha, I’m tied up all day Saturday, then leaving Sunday for San Francisco to visit family for a much needed holiday vacation. If you’d like an artist sooner, my boss can hook you up,” she said, nodding toward SAC Harcourt.

“Absolutely,” Harcourt said. “We have a full list of artists available at a moment’s notice. A number of them on the east coast.”

“If there’s nothing else,” Sydney said, her hand on the door, “I have a class to get back to.”

SA Griffin looked as though there was something else, but then he glanced into the classroom, stepped back, and said, “Enjoy your trip home.”

“That should do it,” Harcourt said. “Thanks.”

The two men left, and Sydney returned to her class, not giving the matter another thought. At least not until she received a call at her office from the forensic anthropologist in question about an hour later. “Syd? Tasha. Just wanted to thank you for the job you sent my way.”

“Not a problem,” Sydney told her as she tucked the phone beneath her ear, balancing it so that she could continue sorting through the course evaluations left by her students in the forensic art class. SAC Harcourt was a stickler for making sure paperwork was completed, and she didn’t want anything hanging when she left for vacation. “What sort of case is it?”

“Not sure. Yet. I heard you can’t work it with me?”

“Flying to my mom’s on Sunday. Too much to do between now and then.”

A moment of silence, then Tasha said, “What happened to that workaholic I used to know?”

“Hit with reality on my last case. One that made me take a hard look at priorities,” she said, not willing to go into details with her friend. It was one of the reasons she’d ended up back at Quantico. In the past, she would have taken this job in an instant, knowing her family would be there when she finished, no matter how long it took. Back then, she believed in what she was doing, believed that she had something to offer, to help. But she’d lost her edge on that last case and she needed to regroup, and flying home to be with her family for the two weeks preceding Thanksgiving was part of that effort. The sad reality was that the dead would be there for her when she got back. What she’d learned on her last case was that her family might not be. Deciding that she should offer her friend some sort of explanation, she added, “These days, family comes first.”

“Don’t blame you. Hold on a sec.” More silence, then, “Sorry. My secretary’s breathing down my neck. Listen, I was thinking that since you sent this forensic job my way, I could buy you dinner. Haven’t seen you since—hell, what’s it been? Six, seven months since you left here?”

“About that long. But let’s catch up when I get back from vacation. Scotty’s already asked me to dinner. He’s helping me look for an apartment tomorrow and wanted to go over a few he found on the internet. I was hoping to find one before I left.”

“You are not going blow me off for an ex-boyfriend. I just got back from a dig and I *so* need to see a friendly face. Girls’ night out for old times’ sake.”

“I really wish I could.”

“You know we’ll have fun, and Scotty will understand. Eventually. Ristorante Primavera at seven. I won’t take no for an answer.”

Tasha hung up before Sydney could object. And she wasn’t even sure she wanted to. Scotty was undoubtedly using the apartment search to go out with her, and she didn’t need to spend Friday night with him just to look at computer printouts of places they were going to see in person on Saturday. The question was whether to hit him with the truth, or come up with a reasonable lie as to why she was canceling dinner. She punched in his number, deciding that when it came to her ex, a lie was the much better option.

{TXB1}

Zachary Griffin hefted the large box to one side as he opened the office door of the Anthropological Division of the National Forensic Institute. The day had started off bad, and now the forensic artist wasn’t available because she was taking vacation in the middle of a month he’d just as soon eliminate from the calendar. As a result he was forced to come up with an alternate solution—something he hadn’t anticipated—and that was a mistake he shouldn’t have made.

He refused to acknowledge that he’d had his mind on other things—this being November—and even if he did admit to that reason, it was not an acceptable excuse. There were no excuses, he thought, as he walked into the office. He nodded at the secretary, a round-faced, middle-aged woman with short blond curly hair, who was busy sorting through a box of papers. She smiled at him, then picked up the phone and called her boss’s extension, saying, “Zachary Griffin’s here ... Very good. I’ll send him in.”

The secretary disconnected, whispered, “FYI. She’s a bit frazzled from her trip. Something about a curse on the tomb.” She angled her head toward the office door. Zach, figuring she was joking about the curse, crossed the reception area as she got back to her filing.

He stepped into the large office, one wall of shelves filled with reference books, the other filled with rows of labeled boxes—each containing bones, each waiting for IDs. Much like the box he now carried. “Your plan backfired, Tasha,” he said. She seemed not to hear, intent on whatever it was she was reading on her computer screen, and he crossed the room, then stopped in surprise at her appearance. He hadn’t seen her since her return from Egypt, only talked to her on the phone. The secretary’s assessment was an understatement. Frazzled was not the word he’d use to describe her, he thought, noting the dark circles beneath her bloodshot blue eyes as she worked at her computer. Usually neat and meticulous, her blond hair was pulled back in a hasty ponytail. Her lab coat was wrinkled, and beneath it she wore a sweatshirt and jeans, also wrinkled, as though she’d grabbed everything from the bottom of some pile in her closet. “You did get my voice mail? Your *friend* is refusing to do the drawing. I don’t suppose you have a Plan B.” Because he sure as hell didn’t.

“Already in the works. I got off the phone with Sydney not five minutes ago,” Tasha said, glancing up from her computer. When she saw the box he held, she sank back in her chair, looking even wearier. “God, please tell me that’s not what I think it is?”

“About your friend?”

“We’re going to dinner tonight. Trust me. By the second bottle of wine I’ll have her convinced to delay her flight to San Francisco and work with me on that drawing, though I think it would have made a hell of a lot more sense just to let her in on some of the details. This whole thing of you and me pretending not to know each other seems a bit much. If you would have let me just pick up the phone, tell her I had a job for—”

“That’s not an option. Your work for me stays out of the public eye. Especially on this matter. Besides, it’s a little late for that. She thinks I’m another agent, and I don’t want the FBI involved beyond the means to complete this drawing.” The only reason he even approached Special Agent Fitzpatrick was on Tasha’s insistence that she was the best forensic artist on the east coast. And—more importantly—Fitzpatrick had been in San Francisco the last six months, too embroiled in the case involving her father’s killer on death row to have paid any attention to what was going on in the capitol with any real interest. Her return to the D.C. area a few weeks ago made her the perfect candidate. She wouldn’t be up on the political scandal running in the newspaper a few months back, accusing a congressman of having an affair with a student at the University of Virginia. “For now,” he said, “we will continue with things my way.”

“Fine,” she said, giving him an exasperated look. “As long as you realize you’re a bit too paranoid. Surely you can trust the FBI?”

“I don’t know who I can trust. And what I need is an identification without recognition.” Anyone in this area during that time was bound to recognize Alessandra from those newspaper photos—should Alessandra end up being the victim. His gut told him that it was her skull in the box, though he wanted to believe otherwise. “So no government agencies. The last thing I need is to have Alessandra’s name linked to the congressman, which could lead back to me.”

Tasha eyed the box, taking a deep breath. “You really believe it’s Alessandra in there?”

“I hope not. But until we know... How soon can you get on this?”

“I’d rather wait until I get Sydney on board.”

“I’m not sure we have that luxury. Get started on the ID now. At least get me a preliminary report. Whatever it is you can determine from a skull. Tonight, convince your friend to do the sketch for identification, make it out like it’s a random murder victim—let’s hope that’s what it turns out to be—and we’ll be that much farther ahead. If you can’t get her on board, I’m going to have to take your report elsewhere and find another artist.”

Zach set the box on her desk. Her phone rang, and she jumped, then gave a nervous laugh as her secretary picked up the other extension.

“You sure you’re okay?” Zach asked.

“Fine. Simple jet lag.”

That was when he glanced over, saw what she’d been looking at on the computer screen. Egyptian curses, just as the secretary had mentioned. “Tell me you’re not serious?”

“Maybe just a little on edge. I was, after all, digging in an Egyptian tomb reputed to have a two-thousand-year-old curse. Half the time I was there, I felt like someone was watching my every move. The other half was exhaustion over the constant charade while I

accompanied a crew who thought me nothing more than an anthropologist associated with an academic research dig.”

“Do you think anyone suspected you?”

“Does it even matter? Because of that dig, Alessandra is missing, and now you’ve found a body and—”

Her secretary poked her head in the door. “Some professor from the American Academy is on line one for you.”

“The American Academy?”

“In Rome. Professor Francesca Santarella.”

“Do me a favor. Take a message and tell her I’ll get back to her.”

“You sure you don’t want to take it?” Zach asked. “I can wait.”

She shook her head. “I contacted so many academic types on that dig that I can’t recall if I should know the name. And the way I feel right now, I don’t have the energy to keep playing my part.”

Definitely stressed. He wondered if perhaps they were asking too much of her. “Tell me again about the Egypt trip.”

She glanced at her computer, then back at him. “As I explained on the phone, more dead ends. If Carlo Adami set up that dig to cover for something, then he did a damned fine job. It looked like the real thing to me. Alessandra even thought so.”

“You’re absolutely sure?”

“Every person on the team was some sort of scholar. Frankly, I think Adami set up the dig as a way to deflect attention from something else. Maybe *somewhere* else. I was there for two weeks. The only weapons I saw were small-caliber pistols by the night security guards. As for a makeshift lab? Nothing in the vicinity that we could see. They definitely weren’t shipping anything in or out. If there were any bioweapons, they were well-hidden among the artifacts being dug up, most of which would fit in the palm of your hand.”

“And no idea why Alessandra left the dig for the States?”

Her gaze flicked to the box on her desk as she shook her head. “Alessandra said she wanted to check on some archeological facts.”

They’d gone over all this before, but he was worried that maybe they’d missed something that might tell them what had happened to Alessandra. “What sort of facts?”

“I wish I could remember,” Tasha said, looking troubled. “Something about three keys... The third key? Whatever it was, she said not to worry, that it was archeological research. Some biblical thing, I thought.”

“Third key? You didn’t mention that the first time.”

“It was just such a strange conversation. At the time it meant nothing. Do you think it’s important?”

He gave a shrug, brushing it off. “When did you last hear from her?”

“She called while I was still in Egypt, but I didn’t get the message until several days later.”

“That’s what I don’t like. No one’s heard from her since.” He rested his hand on top of the box. “And now there’s this.”

She didn’t move, simply stared at the box. And even though she was a forensic anthropologist, and she had dozens more boxes like it on the shelves behind her, it was

apparent that this one got to her. "Was it really necessary to do this?" she said. "A skull in a box?"

"If you saw her, yes. The pathologist is the one who insisted we had go this route. Bring the skull to you. Trust me, we tried everything else."

"Maybe there's another way. Surely DNA...?"

"She was adopted."

"What about her apartment?"

"Unfortunately, the cover story we thought would buy us time actually created a few problems. In theory, telling everyone that she was sent home to her father's, and wasn't expected to return back to UVA anytime soon, should have worked. We didn't take into account that her roommate, short on cash, figured to make a quick buck by subletting Alessandra's room, or that her new tenant would carefully launder and box up the clothes left behind."

"No toothbrush or hairbrush?"

"Alessandra probably had them with her. In hindsight, we should have created the cover story after we'd searched her room. But at the time, we didn't believe she was dead."

"What about dental records?"

"Still looking. Because of her father's occupation, the majority of her dental history is spread about in countries that don't keep such meticulous records. The records we found were inconclusive. We need a forensic sketch. If it is her, her father will want to—" He stopped, ran his fingers through his hair. "How did I ever let her get involved?"

Tasha looked up at Griffin. "Maybe her disappearance has nothing to do with this? Like I said, it was a legitimate dig. And maybe it's not her in that box."

"The boss wants something a bit more definitive than *maybe* it is or isn't her. And if it does have to do with Adami, then we need to be careful. You're absolutely sure this friend of yours will come through?"

"Someday you're going to have to learn to trust someone else's judgment."

"I've gone that route. It didn't work."

A loud bang echoed just outside the closed door. Tasha's breath caught, and she paled, even as her secretary called out, "Sorry. Just a box of file folders."

Griffin looked down at Tasha's hands, saw they were shaking. "What the hell is going on?"

"Besides too much caffeine? It's nothing," she said, clasping her hands in her lap. He crossed his arms, looked her right in the eye. "Fine. But don't laugh. It was this curse. I know it sounds odd, but just hearing about the damned thing gave me nightmares, and I haven't been able to sleep."

"Okay, I'll bite," he said. Even though he didn't have time for this, it was clear that Tasha needed to talk about it. "What does this curse do?"

She gave a sigh, then tried to smile, as though she knew how silly it was going to sound. "Allegedly anyone who enters the tomb will be dead within a fortnight. At least that's the rumor according to the locals we hired." She stared at the box containing the skull, as if to say, *and Alessandra was in that tomb, so that proves it is true.*

"That is not why Alessandra died—if this is her."

"I know you're right."

He wasn't sure what else he could do or say. "Maybe you should start your report on the skull tomorrow. You look tired."

She shook her head. "Trust me. I'll be fine. I'll even put myself together properly before I meet Sydney."

"Call me after your dinner. Let me know how it goes," he said, turning to leave.

"Zach?" He stopped, knowing what she was going to say. "I can go with you, if you like. To the cemetery. I have time."

"I'll be fine." He left, said good-bye to her secretary who was busy sorting through the files she'd dropped. He continued on down the long hallway, his footsteps echoing through the dimly lit corridor. Every office door but the one he'd left was closed. Above him a fluorescent light flickered, then went out. He heard the swish of the elevator door, apparently just missing it, and not wanting to wait, he took the stairs three flights down. Once he'd reached the street he pulled out his cell phone to call his office.

When his boss answered, Zach said, "Did Natasha Gilbert say anything to you when she returned from that dig?"

"I haven't even seen her. Why?"

"She seems on edge." He thought about the ridiculousness of this two-thousand-year-old curse she spoke of. "Whatever it is, I'm not sure she's telling me everything. She did recall that Alessandra spoke of a third key, but that was it."

"You're sure that's what she said?"

"I'm sure that's what Tasha said she heard." He hesitated before adding, "And she thought there was some biblical slant."

"Biblical...?"

"Don't even go there. I don't trust Dumas."

"You don't trust anyone. Since he's the only religious expert we have, I don't see a way around it. We're going to have to contact him."

Zach knew that, but it didn't make things easier. Especially considering what day it was. "One more thing."

"What's that?"

"I need a complete dossier on an FBI agent working out of Quantico. Someone named Sydney Fitzpatrick."

"This that forensic artist you're trying to use?"

"Yes."

"Tell me you have a good reason for me to get my hand spanked poking around in Bureau files?"

"Tasha's meeting her for dinner tonight. If she can't convince her to do this drawing, I may have to intervene and I want to know who I'm dealing with."

Griffin disconnected, dropped his phone in his pocket, then looked at his watch. Just enough time to get to the florist before it closed.

A fitting end to an already bad day, and he wondered if it could get any worse.

## Chapter Two

Sydney Fitzpatrick looked at the boxes stacked around the living room of her apartment, boxes she'd yet to unpack since her transfer to the FBI Academy at Quantico almost a month ago. She thought about digging through them to find her favorite cashmere

sweater, only because Tasha usually dressed for dinner, even at the more casual restaurants. Then again, anything she pulled out of a box was bound to be wrinkled, and after the errands she'd been running this afternoon, she had just about enough time to brush her hair and race out the door as she was.

Tasha was waiting for her at a table in the Ristorante Primavera, an upscale Italian eatery. She stood when Sydney approached, her gaze locked on the door behind her, for what seemed a second too long, before suddenly smiling, then reaching out to give a hug. "Syd! You haven't changed a bit."

"In seven months? I hope not." Sydney eyed her friend as she took a seat opposite her. "How is it you have a tan, when the rest of us haven't seen the sun in weeks?" she said, when what she really wanted to ask was if Tasha was unwell. Beneath that tan, she looked tired, nervous even.

"Just got back from a dig. I'll pay for it down the road, wrinkled like an old prune, but that's the hazard of working in the sun."

"Where this time?"

"Egypt. Valley of the Kings."

They sat, scanned the menu, and almost in unison said, "Pizza Margherita!" A waiter approached, and Tasha ordered a bottle of cabernet to go with the pizza. "Unless you wanted something else?" she asked Sydney.

"Cab is perfect." The waiter left, and Sydney leaned forward. "Is everything okay, Tasha?"

"*Major* jet lag. I've only been back a couple days. But trust me. A couple bottles of wine, a taxi ride home, I'll sleep like a baby and all will be well with the world. How about you? I heard about all the mess with your father's old case."

"I'm fine. The case is fine," Sydney said, not wanting to get into the particulars of what had happened to her father. Not here at dinner. "So tell me about this latest dig of yours. Bones? Pottery? Ancient treasure?"

"Is the FBI spying on me?"

"Spying?" Sydney laughed. "Yeah, we've got a whole wing at Quantico devoted to the pyramids. Right next to the X-files. So give me the scoop. Find anything interesting?"

Tasha smiled. "Besides a few pottery shards? Nothing. What about you? How's this forensic art class you're teaching at the academy?"

"So far so good," Sydney replied, as the waiter returned with the wine. "Two-week course. Students are a mix of police officers and civilians working for law enforcement agencies from around the country. It's fun."

They spent the next hour talking about everything from Sydney's work to which fashion designer needed to die for bringing back some godforsaken style, like neon oversized flower prints that never should have seen the light of day in the first place. The closest they got to talking about Tasha's job was when she tried to convince Sydney to put off her plane trip and work the forensic ID case with her, which struck Sydney as odd—never mind that the whole time they sat there, Tasha's attention seemed to wander toward the entrance and the street front window. Sydney would have dismissed it as simple preoccupation, if it weren't for the fact that Tasha was definitely jumpy. Maybe something was wrong at work. Stress, bosses, who knew? "You sure you're okay?" Sydney asked.

Tasha started to deny it again, but suddenly stopped, leaned back in her chair and said, "You'd never believe it if I told you."

"Told me what?"

"The tomb I was in? Supposedly anyone who entered was subject to a two-thousand-year-old curse and would be dead in a fortnight. So, call it bullshit, call it whatever. It gave me nightmares, and I haven't been able to sleep."

"Nightmares?"

"You know how vivid my dreams are. Like after I saw that Count Dracula movie and everyone in my dreams sprouted fangs and came after me, and I had to defang them?"

"I thought you said you were a kid when that happened?"

"I was. But I remember it like it was yesterday, and if I never see another Dracula movie again, it'll be too soon. Now give me the real dirt. Why is Scotty helping you look for an apartment? I thought you two broke up?"

There it was again. That turn away from Tasha back to her. Maybe it was best just to let it go. Tasha was a big girl, and certainly knew Sydney was there for her. "We're done."

"For good?"

"For good. But we're still friends." Scott Ryan, her ex-fiancé, was happily married to the FBI, which left no room for her. "Why? You interested in him?"

"Hardly, but there was that cute friend of his who worked in the same bureau. The one who just got divorced..." Tasha was three years divorced, and as far as Sydney knew, not in a particular hurry to settle down again.

"Carter?"

"Yeah. Too bad I'm going to Italy at the end of next week, which is why I need you to work with me on this drawing before I go," Tasha said, tipping the last of the wine into her glass, then signaling for the waiter to bring them another bottle. "If I hadn't already committed to this dig, I'd give him or any other eligible male some *serious* consideration."

"I'm sure Carter will be there when you get back," Sydney said, thinking that was the closest Tasha had come to talking about herself all night. "Me, I've sworn off feds."

"All feds, or just Scotty?"

"My opinion, Scotty's a good representative example of what they're like."

"He's damned cute, if you ask me," Tasha said, seeming more like her old self.

"And a really nice guy. But if you want a warm body sleeping in your bed each night, pick a man in the private sector."

The waiter brought a second bottle of cabernet, and as he walked off, Tasha leaned over and whispered, "Waiters are in the private sector."

Tasha's laugh was vivacious, infectious, and by the time they finished their second bottle, Sydney wasn't sure if she'd ever again look at a glass of cabernet without thinking of waiters in Italian restaurants.

The next morning Sydney wasn't sure if she'd ever look at a glass of red wine period. A textbook hangover made her head pound, and when the phone rang, the pounding increased tenfold. She hoped like hell it wasn't Tasha, because she had a hell of a time convincing her that she was *not* giving up her trip home.

"You ready to go look for apartments this afternoon?" It was Scotty, who, ever since her transfer back to Quantico, had made it his mission to get her out of her temporary apartment supplied for agents in downtown Washington, D.C. She'd done little to discourage his interest, because it gave her something to talk about with Scotty, telling him that she wanted to find a decent place to live.

It was really a smoke screen. She liked temporary. It meant she didn't need to make a decision. "Yeah, maybe... I don't know. I'm a little hung over."

"From what?"

"Tasha and I went drinking last night," she said, before she remembered the lie she'd told him about having a headache and just wanting to relax for the evening. "I started to feel better and she called. I'm sorry."

A stretch of silence.

"I figured you'd already made other plans," she said.

"Did I say anything?"

Did he ever? "Look, I've got to go take mass quantities of ibuprofen. I'll be ready in an hour."

{TXB1}

"Anything in the newspapers?"

Jon Westgate lit a cigarette, glanced over at his boss. "Not yet."

"Do not smoke in here."

"Sorry." But he made no move to put it out. Instead, he walked toward the window, away from the man who sat in the leather wingback chair, drinking his coffee. Politicians. He wouldn't be working for one if the perks weren't so damned good. "I've checked all the papers, and the internet. Nothing."

"I find that odd. A young woman so brutally murdered... One would think they'd want her identified."

"If that were the case," Westgate said, "maybe one *shouldn't* have had her face removed."

An icy silence seemed to fill the room, and Westgate wondered if perhaps he'd been too sarcastic to the man who was signing his checks, until his boss said, "You're right. It seems the man Adami sent was a bit overzealous when I suggested that we didn't want her immediately identifiable."

"Adami is becoming a problem. He is obsessed with these Masonic symbols."

"Most Grand Masters are."

"Most Grand Masters don't carve pyramids on a girl's face. Clearly he ordered his man to do it. I think he needs to be reined in."

"I'll make that decision. For now, I'm curious to find out what this third key is. He insists that it'll change the course of bioweaponry."

"I thought you said it was nothing but a pipe dream?"

"I still think so. But I'm also smart enough to know that I don't know everything, especially when it comes to biblical history. I imagine that has something to do with this latest scientist Adami picked up, Dr. Balraj. His specialty is in the evolution of plagues." He shook the paper out, then turned the page. "I just don't get this. How is it this girl hasn't been reported missing? I have plans for this when she is identified, and it would be nice if it made the news. Are you sure there's nothing?"

"It's like the entire government has closed ranks around this case."

"That can't be good."

"There is one small lead."

"About?"

"Her skull," Westgate said, taking a long drag from the cigarette, then exhaling a plume of smoke against the cold windowpane. He looked out to the street below.

Pedestrians hurried across the intersection, stepping over shallow snowdrifts from the previous night's storm. "My source thinks they'll take it to Quantico. We're looking into it."

"I want to know everyone who is even remotely connected to this case."

Westgate opened the window, flicked his cigarette into the dirty slush in the street below. "Arrangements are already being made."

{TXB1}

Sydney Fitzpatrick stepped off the plane that Sunday at San Francisco airport, looking forward to time with her family, especially her eleven-year-old sister. Her vision of two weeks of relaxation culminating into a home-cooked turkey dinner evaporated the moment she was greeted by SFO airport police.

"Special Agent Fitzpatrick?" the uniformed man asked her, after the flight attendant pointed her out.

"Yes."

"You need to call Quantico at once." He checked a piece of paper he held. "Contact SAC Harcourt."

"Thank you," she said, taking out her phone and powering it on, then hitting speed dial for Harcourt's cell phone.

"Hate to cut your vacation short," Harcourt said, once they connected. "But we need you for that drawing."

"What happened to that spiel about the full list of artists available at a moment's notice?" she asked.

"Think of it this way. You come do the drawing, and you're back in San Francisco before the turkey's thawing on the counter."

As much as she wanted to decline the job, if they'd gone to this much trouble to get her, she knew she couldn't. She'd accepted the transfer to Quantico for a reason. True, she needed the rest and respite from her last case that almost ended her career, never mind her life. She'd gone out of her comfort zone on that last assignment, and she wasn't about to venture out again. But the hard truth she didn't want to face was that she'd pushed the envelope so far, the Bureau was watching her, and wanted to know if she was a team player. Besides, Thanksgiving was nearly two weeks away. A drawing with a forensic anthropologist couldn't take more than a day, maybe two, depending on the condition of the body. "Let me check on flights and I'll call you back."

"We have a plane standing by. The officer will take you to it."

And that didn't make any sense. Since when did the Bureau have private planes waiting for something that could have, *should have* been dealt with before she ever left Washington, D.C.? Like they were expecting to fly her back?

Something was up.