

The frontal bone is the first to crown through the thick dirt. It gleams bright white in the glare of the halogen lamps.

"I think it's a skull," my wife tells me, sickened. Physical anthropology was never her bag. Human remains can be kind of messy. She much prefers the neat theory of cultural anthropology. I was called out on short notice and didn't have enough time to put together a proper crew. I got her to come by promising she'd find nothing more than bones picked clean by nearly half a century's time. For some people, even that's a little too much to stomach.

I rub her back across the shoulders hoping it'll calm her. "Are you okay to finish the excavation?"

She smiles, nods, and continues digging.

Ten minutes later she calls me over again.

"It's small," she says, matter-of-factly.

"Probably a child's."

She winces. "A child's?"

I nod.

"Oh, God. How old?"

"Judging by the number of milk-teeth? Six. Maybe eight."

"Eight years old?" she asks. "Boy or girl?"

"Hard to tell. Skeletal structure's hard to differentiate at that age." My wife stares at the find, paling.

"Molly, are you okay?" I ask her.

She says nothing, but continues to stare at the skull instead.

"Molly?"

When she looks up at me, her expression is drawn. "Fine," she says, standing. "I need some air." She drops her trowel on the ground. It slices at the soil as it lands.

"She okay?" Detective Constable Michael Crestwood, my contact at the local police department says.

I tell him she's fine. Maybe a little claustrophobic, but fine. I think it was the fact the skeleton she found belonged to a child that's jarred her more than anything else. We've been trying to get pregnant without success for almost a year now. It's the notion that anyone could think of something as precious a child as throwaway that's gotten to her. It's knowing that someone was fortunate enough to have been gifted the care of an innocent life, abused the responsibility, and buried his sin in an unmarked grave in the basement. It's feeling hopeless, because even if you could prove who committed the atrocity in the first place, it's probably too late to do anything about it.

"Richardson?" Crestwood asks. "Are you okay?"

"I think I need some air, too."

I got the call from Crestwood late last night. Acting on a tip they'd received on the CrimeStoppers call line, police raided an old Victorian mansion turned crack-house near the downtown core. They'd imported Vinnie the "Cadaver Dog" from Britain, a springer spaniel trained to sniff out buried human remains. Vinnie went crazy atop the concrete basement slab. They called me in during the final stages of concrete removal. My name is Palmer Richardson. I teach archaeology at the University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada. My specialty is forensic anthropology. I'm like those guys you see on television who work alongside the police to identify murder victims, especially when all that's left are the bones. Virtually everything a person does in life leaves its mark on the bones. Things like sex, age, diet, physical activity—it's all there, written in the bones. The trick is in learning how to read the signs. Crestwood had been on enough of these cases to know when something's been buried like that, and for such a long period of time, chances are nothing'll be left behind but the bones. He'd called me relatively early in the investigation so I'd be on call the moment they needed me. Though I usually keep my wife out of it—Molly

gets squeamish cleaning chicken—I needed the extra set of hands and enlisted her help.

Crestwood stands inside the screened-in porch. "You guys okay out here?" he asks. We mutter something sounding like affirmation. "Cause we've found some more, if you're ready for it."

Molly and I look at each other. She still looks a little green, even bathed in the glow of overcast sunlight. "You don't have to finish this, Moll," I tell her.

"If it were my child, I'd want to know," she says. "That child's mother has a right to know."