

Prologue

If Lilly Mae had known ahead of time that this day was going to start off with a dead man and end with a police interrogation, at best she would have spent the night out of town visiting her boyfriend. At the least she would not have drunk so much tequila with her girlfriends at Sailor's Return the evening before.

At precisely 6:53 a.m., the sun rose brilliantly along the St. Lucie river and pierced forcefully through Lilly's shades, a tiny sliver just about an eighth of an inch where the shade and window failed to meet. Her head throbbed, writhing in pain, urging her to get up and search for pain meds to relieve the tension from her brain. She lingered in bed a few more moments, until a glint of sunshine hit Dexter's face—her black tricolor Australian shepherd. Bright light flickering around the room was just enough to excite him and force Lilly Mae to welcome him to another new and exciting day. Just like every other day, at that shining moment, Dexter started tap-dancing by the bed. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. The sound of his nails against the tile floor demanded she awaken and take him outside.

Ugh, why can't I ever sleep in? Stupid sun! "Okay, pup. Let's go out," she muttered reluctantly.

She ambled along sluggishly to the full-length mirror and could hardly recognize herself. "How much did I drink last night?" She offered the rhetorical question to the mirror. Her mud-brown hair matted to her head, mostly on the right side, black mascara smeared under both eyes, and blue eyeshadow smudged against her nose and forehead. She turned away in despair. I must make an effort to drink less, she thought.

She trudged down the stairs and opened the slider for Dexter to relieve himself in the grass beyond the pool deck. She set the Keurig for a large cup of coffee, then suddenly changed her mind—better make it a pot today. She swallowed two Motrin, no water necessary as she was a true professional. She prepared breakfast for Dexter while the coffee brewed. When he reappeared in front of the slider to be let back in, she noticed he was holding a strangely shaped, rather large bone; his happiness was emanating through his wagging tail. He was beside himself with joy for the present he had brought home for her today. He rushed in and dropped it on the kitchen floor with the alacrity of a middle school cheerleader.

“Good boy,” she said and gingerly petted the top of his head. Positive affirmations are important for a pet’s well-being, the vet often proposed whenever she told stories of the many dead animals Dexter liked to drag into the house.

“What you might consider gross is really your doggie bringing you a gift because he loves you,” he would say.

“I understand,” she would chime back, but in reality it didn’t make that much sense to her. Dexter knew her well enough to know that if he really wanted to make her happy, he could bring her a bag of Doritos and a bottle of tequila. Well, one can only dream.

Once the vet proclaimed, “Dexter really does live up to his name, doesn’t he?” He, of course, was referring to the *Dexter* TV show about a blood spatter specialist turned serial killer.

She knelt down to further investigate her strange gift, the bone now highlighted by gleams of light radiating through the kitchen window. She snatched the tongs out of the utensil drawer, and after further inspection, she could tell undeniably that this was a jawbone. Not that of a bunny or fox, common to this area, but rather a *human* jawbone. It was unmistakable. This was the upper part, complete with two canines, four incisors, and all molars still intact. She was quite familiar with this piece of anatomy, as she had spent the last ten years as a dental hygienist.

“Holy shit, Dexter. Seems like our sleepy little town has finally got something interesting to talk about.”

She instinctively grabbed her cell phone from the kitchen counter and dialed 911.

Her first few words: “Hello? You are not going to believe this, but . . .”

