

The smell of charred flesh overwhelmed the scent of antiseptic and the industrial cleaner used to keep the room sterile. It resembled any other medical suite in any other medical facility, gurneys, tools, staff in scrubs, but unlike those other rooms, there was no sense of urgency in Trudy's morgue. The reduced temperature preserved organic material. It preserved the odor as well. It didn't go away despite the air purification system. Trudy's eyes and nostrils burned. The menthol gel she'd rubbed on her upper lip lost the war hours earlier, but she didn't stop. Couldn't. The victims and their families needed answers. She couldn't bring back the homes they lost, the lives destroyed, the memories buried under cindered rubble, but this she could do and would without complaint.

"Doctor Beasley?"

"Cara. I've told you repeatedly to call me Trudy." She lifted her head. Cara grimaced as the latest body bag arrived. Trudy swallowed a sigh. She'd cautioned Cara regarding her reactions. Their patients may be dead, but still deserved respect. The young woman was smart and capable, but not suited for a job in the morgue. "Please don't make that face."

"I'm sorry, Doctor... Trudy. But you need to see this."

With her gloved hands elevated to prevent cross-contamination, Trudy joined the intern. She snapped her gloves off after a quick glance. "Pick up the autopsy where I left off. I need to make a call."

She ignored the greetings as she crossed the hall to her office. Since she often spent more time here than at home, she kept the environment comfortable rather than institutional, opting for an over-stuffed sofa and soft lighting from funny little candlestick lamps with fringed shades, but she flicked on the fluorescent overheads in passing and spun through the ancient Rolodex she kept on her desk. Dialed and grabbed a water bottle from the mini fridge. Trudy guzzled down cool, wet relief.

"The Anthropology Department at the University of Penn. How can I help you?" A prim voice answered.

Trudy pictured the office receptionist from her high school. The woman's stare could wither the rowdiest of teenagers. "Good afternoon, this is Dr. Gertrude Beasley, Assistant Chief Medical Examiner for the City of Philadelphia. We're working on the victims from the explosion and have recovered skeletal remains."

"How many? How old?"

"Undetermined. We need a forensic anthropologist to consult." Trudy cut off the next question. "Look, I'm not trying to be rude, but if your guy is going to ask the same questions, I'd rather answer them once."

"Understood. Professor Roberts is teaching this morning, but his afternoon is free. He can be there in about an hour."

“Perfect. Thank you.” Trudy placed the handset in its cradle, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. The cucumber and eucalyptus oil diffuser did little to help ease the knots in her neck and shoulders. As she stood in the quiet that wasn’t, the sounds of people in the hall, of the activity death birthed, were as common as the sound of her own pulse in her ears and didn’t register, but the hum generated by commercial lighting bled through and set her back teeth on edge. “Five minutes. I need five minutes.”

Trudy cut off the overheads, turned the lock on her door, and sank onto the sofa. Death was her job. She was a scientist, a doctor, foremost. Though she’d been born with a gift for compartmentalization, she never learned how to not become emotionally involved. Once she shut off the scientist, the woman grieved. Three days of burned bodies, plus the violent, unexplained, and unattended deaths Philadelphia regularly generated. She’d been going non-stop. Her boss handled the press and the police, her assistants dealt with frantic family members, Trudy delegated autopsies where she could, but she had little rest. Now bones, an entire bag of bones. It takes weeks, sometimes years, for a body to decompose depending on a variety of factors, she recalled from her days in medical school. Those bones aren’t recently dead. Fresh death was her job. One that never stopped. I’m going home early tonight. I’m going to shower and unplug and decompress.