

Excerpt from *Baby Bones, Third Skeleton Series Mystery* by Donan Berg.

Enjoy this taste.

“Do you have to leave? It’s the middle of the night.”

“Yes, deputy called. Said it’s urgent.”

Sheriff Jonas McHugh observed the distant faint flashing of emergency lights ahead. Must be this side of the bridge crossing. He’d never seen it so desolate. His cruiser headlights punched through the darkness. With the flat terrain, he clicked them to high. Unmoving clouds above this country road obscured the illumination of a full moon he had seen fifteen minutes before within the city limits. The familiar outline of a Silver County Sheriff’s Department squad became visible. Where’s the civilian vehicle? He cautiously slowed to a stop.

“Bonnie,” he shouted, standing behind his open driver door.

“Down here Jonas.” He glimpsed the waving flashlight beam to his right.

He locked his cruiser. His boots crunched on the gravel surface of the road before he slid down the grassy embankment alongside the bridge abutment. “What’ve you got?” On the riverbank, a chill ran down his spine when Deputy Bonnie Hughes pulled back one end of the blue plastic wrapping. The skull at his feet offered no expression. His flashlight beam cast eerie shadows across the weathered texture of human bone. His law enforcement training never completely took hold for he could never remain steeled and unemotional when required to witness the evil man inflicted upon others. His belly filled with a cold heaviness. “How’d you come across Mr. John Doe here?”

“Fisherman found him,” replied Bonnie, softly. The sheriff had recommended

Deputy Hughes leave her post a year ago, but she refused and her father sat on the Board of County Commissioners so it never happened. Her eyes that normally displayed everyday merriment reflected a paralyzing horror. Her delicate facial features had tightened. Jonas mentally slapped his face and physically rubbed the sleepiness out of his eyes to process the matter at hand.

“Who fishes at four o’clock in the morning?” he asked.

“Joel, Joel Henderson. He’s sitting in my car.” She pointed a flashlight beam up the embankment. “I called the coroner right after you. Expected you’d be here first, but not so quickly.”

“Bonnie, you can’t call the coroner before you know he’s needed. A strange, unopened bundle isn’t enough.” Bonnie pointed the flashlight at her feet. “You got the department on his bad side with an unnecessary call six months ago.”

“My best intuition said it’d save time.”

He didn’t know how better to make his point. “All I’m saying is use better judgment and proper procedure. I don’t want to take the heat again for a bad call.”

Bonnie, head down, yanked again at the plastic, however, it resisted. The two of them could only see the skeleton’s head and shoulder blades. Two bungee cord ropes still encircled the plastic bundle, although now loose, their elasticity hadn’t totally disappeared. She crouched and gazed up at her boss. “Strange.” Her gloved hand separated another layer of plastic. “If this body had been submersed why’s there no evidence of water between these inner layers of plastic.”

“Gosh darn interesting.” He had seen enough. “You stay here. I’ll meet the coroner up on the road. Check out that fisherman.”

The sheriff, catching his breath after climbing the embankment, jabbed at the keyless entry pad in the sequence of the departmental code before he rapped on the backseat window of his deputy's squad car and stepped back. He wasn't able to identify Joel Henderson or whoever huddled on the backseat, but he knew the window couldn't be rolled down. He squared his body, opened the door, and watched, ready for any sudden move. A young man stepped out into the chilled night air, cold for June.

"Understand your name's Joel. You find the body?"

"Yes sir." Joel's body shivered as he tried to rewrap the coarse, brown, military blanket around his shoulders. Below the edge of the blanket wetness appeared and mud caked his pants at both knees.

"Tell me what you're doing out here at this time of night?" The sheriff's gaze swept Joel's body from his black tousled head hair to well-worn work boots now encased with drying mud.

"I go fishing after work. Normally father north, but the faster current upstream had me searching for calmer water here below the dam. That's when I saw the bundle. I called 91-1 right away." His eyes rotated down as if to count the loose pebbles on the hard earth. "You open it?" Jonas unsnapped the pocket button on his uniform shirt. He left his spiral notebook in the pocket.

"No sir. Not me. I was afraid of what I might find. Only pulled it completely out of the water. Can I go back and find my pole and tackle box?"

End of excerpt

Author Donan Berg is the author of several acclaimed mysteries, including his Skeleton Mystery Series. They include *A Body To Bones*, *The Bones Dance Foxtrot*, and *Baby Bones*. For police procedural fans there is *Adolph's Gold*.

He is also the author of *One Paper Heart* which won the Feathered Quill First Place Gold Award for Romance. His latest is a romance thriller entitled *Alexa's Gold*.

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