

Chapter One

I am passionate about a few things—my daughters, old houses, the neighborhood I live and work in, white wine, and chocolate. But certainly not skeletons. I could have lived my life without ever seeing a skeleton. And yet that’s just what I saw one fall morning after I answered the phone at my real estate office. I had no idea of the twisted and scary road that skeleton would lead me down.

I reached for the phone hoping, maybe, for a new real estate listing or a buyer panting after one of the Craftsman houses I had redone. But not something dead, something dead a long time. It was an October day, with North Texas at its best—sunny, temperature in the 70s, a light breeze, and trees that were beginning to turn because we had a cold snap. The girls—Maggie, seven, and Em, four—had been laughingly happy when I took them to school. I was finalizing the details of a contract—a nice real estate sale that would boost my firm’s income for the year, so when the phone rang, it was an intrusion.

“O’Connell and Spencer Realtors,” I answered automatically, my tone somewhat terse. I admit I don’t handle interruptions well, but I can’t bear to let a phone ring unanswered.

“Miss Kelly, you come right now. Mother of God!” Anthony Dimitrios, the carpenter and jack-of-all-trades who renovates houses for me, yelled into the phone. He is volatile, given to outbursts of various emotions, from anger to joy, and I don’t take any of that seriously. But this was different. This was panic.

“I’m on my way,” I said, even as I heard the phone click dead. No chance to ask him what was the matter. Slipping my feet back into shoes and grabbing my purse and keys, I headed out the door. Where was Keisha? My office manager had disappeared. *She’s probably gone to get lunch.* I locked the office, my thoughts tumbling. Whatever was the matter with Anthony, I had a bad feeling about it in the pit of my stomach.

I am the O’Connell part of O’Connell & Spencer—Kelly O’Connell—and my ex-husband, Tim Spencer, was the Spencer part. It’s a small firm in the Fairmount neighborhood of Fort Worth. Though Tim left over three years ago, I hadn’t changed the name. O’Connell Realtors sounded ordinary to me. I liked having the business to myself—well, most of the time.

Tim was smart about real estate, but he wasn't so smart about people, and I found I got along with clients better than he did.

Anthony was working on a house on Fairmount Avenue, a wonderful red brick with a wide, roofed front porch held in by a three-foot solid brick wall and evenly matched round pillars reaching from the low wall to the roof line. The house had leaded glass bay windows, hardwood floors, and solid oak woodwork, once painted white but now painstakingly being restored to the original varnished state. It was a two-bedroom, or I'd have thought about moving the girls and myself into it.

Anthony stood on the front porch, wiping his forehead with a big handkerchief and running his hand through his hair, a nervous gesture. He was a big burly man of about sixty with dark curly hair just touched with bits of gray and usually laughing eyes. His eyes weren't laughing now. *He's standing there so it can't be that bad.* "Anthony, what's the matter?"

"Wait till you see," he said, leading me into the house, through the living room and dining room and into the kitchen.

The kitchen was once redone, maybe not too long ago. It was now a galley kitchen, which didn't match the house at all. In the name of frugality, we decided against trying to puzzle out the original configuration, but one thing bothered both of us. On the left wall there was a deep cabinet—we decided to put pull-out drawers on rollers, so that the back space could be easily reached. Next to that, though, was a shallow cabinet with shelves no more than three or four inches deep, enough for spices or one row of canned goods but nothing more. Beyond that the oven and microwave extended much farther back. What was behind the spice cabinet? We laughed about that dead space, and then Anthony suggested we make the spice shelves swing out like a false door, so that the occupants of the house could utilize the space behind. I thought it was a terrific idea.

Today, he'd pulled out the spice shelves and the sheet of wood that held them, all in one piece. It leaned against the counter on the other side of the kitchen. But when I entered the kitchen, he pointed to the space behind where they'd been, and then he wiped his brow again. The space looked like an empty cabinet with nothing put into it. Whatever, I wondered, could be wrong with him? I looked inside the dead space, but it was too dark to make out much except a wooden box, sort of like an old orange crate only larger. "Pull that out," I said to him.

"Mother of God, no, not me."

“Well, give me your flashlight.” I shined the light inside the box. A skeleton, a human form, was curled in a fetal position inside the box. I gasped and pulled back. Anthony was no help. Some instinct told me not to move the skeleton. What had I read in all those mysteries? Don’t mess with a crime scene.

“I’m sorry, Miss Kelly.” He always calls me Miss Kelly, which irritates me a bit. I don’t call him Mr. Anthony. “I wanted to warn you, but...” His large shoulders shrugged.

“Nothing to be sorry about, Anthony. You didn’t put it here.” My heart was pounding. He held up his hands, palms out, denying any knowledge.

I wasn’t sure what I felt—shock, surprise, fear. A skeleton was once a living human being. How had this person died, stuffed in a box? The horror of it made me clasp my hand to my mouth, afraid I was going to be sick. And a bit of me—not the better part, I admit—felt repulsion. A skeleton is gross. I was also apprehensive, dreading that this discovery would only lead to something worse.

Holding my breath, I looked closer. Mummified bits of skin around the mouth pulled it back into a grotesque grin. Bits of hair, faded now so that no color was discernible, clung to the skull, and scraps of fabric clung to the bones. It was impossible to tell without touching—and I didn’t want to anyway—but I thought the fabric was lightweight, maybe once even floral. Now it was dirty gray. A woman, I decided, and, from the size, a young woman. But for all I knew, it could have been a young boy.

Digging in my purse, I handed Anthony my cell phone and ordered, “Call 911.”

He took the phone and went to the front porch. I stood by the box, as though the poor creature needed someone to watch over her—or him. Within minutes, I heard the wail of sirens, and it dawned on me that Anthony didn’t tell them it wasn’t a fresh body.

Two police officers rushed in, not quite with guns drawn but looking on the ready, checking out the situation. One was an officer I knew—Mike Shandy, who was assigned to the Fairmount neighborhood. I sometimes ran into him at neighborhood meetings and at the Old Neighborhood Grill on Park Place, where locals went for food and gossip. His wholesome, ex-Marine look—dark blonde crew cut, really blue eyes, and a nice grin—was appealing. I told myself I didn’t notice such things, especially when I was standing over a skeleton.

“Hey, Kelly,” Officer Mike Shandy said. “Didn’t expect to see you.”

“Hey, Mike,” I replied. “We own this house. But there’s no need to hurry. This one’s been here a long time.”

Shandy peered into the box and let out a loud, “Oh, my God!”

The other officer paled.

“What do you know?” Shandy asked.

“Not a thing, except that Anthony found this just now when he took out those shelves.” I pointed to the shelves leaning against the counter. “We wondered what was on the other side of them.” My voice was shaky at first, but as I talked it gained some strength.

“How long have you owned this house? Previous owners?”

“I bought it about four months ago from a young couple who’d lived here two years. I don’t think they were ready to be urban pioneers once they found out they were going to be parents.” Urban pioneers was what Fairmount residents often called themselves, living in a neighborhood where an updated home was likely to stand next to a run-down, paint-peeling, porch-sagging structure with a refrigerator on the front porch and cars parked in the front yard.

Things went along like all the police procedurals I’d ever watched on late-night TV, when sleep wouldn’t come. The evidence team arrived, photographed everything, dusted for fingerprints—a huge waste of time, to my mind, since they’d find Anthony’s and not much else, maybe mine. Then the medical people arrived. They quickly decided to take box and all to the morgue—transferring the fragile contents to a gurney presented insurmountable problems. I hung around because I felt I ought to... and because I was curious.

When all the technical people began to leave, Mike looked at me, and said, “Don’t leave town.” But he said it with a wry grin that I liked, the kind of grin that might be a slight bit of flirting. Then it hit me again—flirting over a skeleton, even if it was now gone out of the house? Couldn’t be.

“Of course not, but I’m glad we found this instead of some new owner. Tell me, how does a living, breathing person end up a skeleton in a dead space in an old house?” I thought a minute and then added, “I think it’s a she.”

“So do I,” he said. “But we’ll get a medical report. It takes longer with skeletal remains.”

“Can they tell how long it’s been here?”

“From what I understand, that’s the hardest part. They can tell age, weight, previous injuries—all that sort of stuff—but how long is pretty much a guessing game. If we had a clue

who she—or it—was, we might try for dental records. But that’s a long shot until we identify the, uh, body. When was the house built?”

“1916.”

He whistled. “Wow. Almost a hundred years. Theoretically, we’d have to look through newspapers, missing person’s reports, and all that since 1916. No telling how long it takes a body to get in that condition—if it was someplace really cold or really dry, you’d have a mummy. But not in Texas. Varmints had something to do with turning the body into a skeleton. They can get into places we think are sealed tight.”

There were rats and mice all over Fairmont, and I knew that, but the idea still gave me the creeps. I wondered if the body smelled at one point—enough to alert neighbors that something was wrong. Sure, skeletons don’t smell—but dead bodies do after a few days, and from all the TV shows I’ve watched, the smell is pretty powerful and pretty awful. Didn’t anyone notice? And who lived in the house at the time?

Mike Shandy was businesslike. “I’ll let you know what forensics turns up. But it won’t be quick.” And then he added, “We’ll have to tape off the house for a few days. Guess you’ll have to stop work.”

Swell. I want Anthony to finish this house so I can sell it, and now he has to stop work. Anthony sat perched on the wide, concrete top of the porch wall, smoking a cigar which he usually never did around me.

“Sorry,” I said. “I should have told you not to hang around. You want to take a couple of days off? They’re going to put crime scene tape around the house, and nobody’s supposed to go in or out.”

He grinned. “Yeah, I’d like that. I’ll take my boys fishing in the river. I need to get away from this place for a bit. That...it spooked me.” Anthony’s much younger wife died of cancer a couple of years earlier, leaving him with three children to raise. Emil, I thought, was about seven by now, and Stefan was twelve. The oldest, Theresa, was seventeen. She sometimes babysat for me, and I worried about her because she was saddled with the care of the family.

“I’ll go home now and tell them they can play hooky tomorrow,” Anthony said, walking down the stairs.

I didn’t remind him that the school system’s attitude toward playing hooky, even with parental approval, was strict. Instead, I asked, “What about Theresa?” I asked.

He frowned. “She won’t fish. She’ll have to go to school.”

Something struck me as wrong about that, but it wasn’t my business.

When I finally left the Fairmount house, I intended to go back to the office and finish up that contract—until I glanced at my watch. I was already late to pick up the girls, a situation that was too chronic with me and always made me feel like a bad mother. I made a conscious decision not to tell the girls about the skeleton. It would just scare them, and I was still hoping that it would amount to nothing in our lives.

I went first to the day-care center where four-year-old Em wiles away the time until she is old enough for kindergarten.

“Hi, Mom,” she said, reaching up for a kiss. “How was your day?”

It was such a solemn, caring question that I almost cried.

“It was okay, sweetie. How was yours?”

“Not so good,” she said matter-of-factly. “I was ready to go home after lunch. But Miss Emily told me you couldn’t come get me that early.”

“She was right, honey. I was busy, but one day soon, we’ll play hooky all day, okay?” I think I got the idea from Anthony. If he could do it, so could I.

That quiet, sincere voice again, “I’d like that, Mom.” Em was my solemn child, and I often worried that she needed more laughter in her life.

Her sister, Maggie, on the other hand, was a blithe spirit, full of joy and laughter one minute and pouting the next. This afternoon she was pouting and not at all forgiving when I picked her up at the local elementary school where there was also an after-school program.

“You’re late,” she said accusingly, “and that makes Miss Benson angry.”

She’s already acting like a teenager, angry and bored with adults, and she’s only seven! I admitted to myself, however, that I only saw flashes of that behavior. Most of the time, Maggie was a love, a child who would run a block to give me a hug. Besides, she was right. The after-school day-care program director frowned at me when I straggled in after four o’clock, and I’d ignored the look. I wondered if she’d asked Maggie, in exasperation, “Where *is* your mother?”

Now I felt guilty about both girls. “I’m sorry, Maggie, I had sort of an emergency.”

“Well,” Maggie said in her determined voice, “Daddy was never late. I just hope I’m not too late for ballet.”

I wanted to scream and ask her how she remembered that her father was never late when he hadn't seen the girls in three years. And besides, if he was never late picking her up, he was always late with payments, be they mortgage, car, or child support. Nowadays he wasn't even making the latter.

Em moaned. "Do I have to watch Maggie's ballet lesson?" This earned her a jab in the ribs from her older sister, which set Em to wailing.

"No, Em. You and I will go to the grocery while Maggie's in her lesson. And you're not late, Maggie. Your ballet things are right there in the back of the car where you put them."

"I didn't put them anywhere," Maggie said, "They're laid out in my room."

My instant thought was, "I told you this morning to put them in the car." But instead of making a deteriorating situation worse, I said, "Fine. We'll go home and get them. It will only take a second, and you'll still be on time."

And she was, but barely. One of the advantages of living and working in Fairmount is that everything is handy, even the school and the day-care. I raced into the house, grabbed Maggie's ballet clothes, and was back in the car before the girls could start fussing at each other.

After we'd walked Maggie into class—never let a child out of the car by herself is one of my rules—I said to Em, "Let's you and me rush to the grocery for a few things and then surprise Maggie with pizza." Keisha was always complaining that I fed the girls junk food, but when you're late and tired, pizza and frozen dinners sure are easy. I know better, and I am always resolving to make home-cooked meals, but I usually only manage one or two of those a week.

"Okay, Mom, pizza would be good. I like it."

I'd been a single working mom for three years. I loved my children, I loved my job, but I was getting tired of juggling. When Tim was there to share, it was a lot better—I couldn't believe that thought even went through my mind. But Tim loved his daughters—or had then—and carried his share of parenting responsibilities. It was just now that he'd dropped out of their lives like a stone dropping into deep water, and I knew Maggie missed him. She remembered the good times—and so did I.

For a long time, Tim and I were happy. We had all the things young couples want—and sooner than most couples. I later found out that was because Tim wasn't paying bills, but at the time I enjoyed the dinner parties we gave, the Christmases when Tim bought way too many presents, the vacations we took.

Sometimes I look back and think I was blind and dumb.

The pizza was a success. I got Em settled into pajamas in front of her favorite video, something about Dora, and I sat down at the dining table to help Maggie with her homework. By eight o'clock the girls were in bed, and I was exhausted.

Once I was in bed, my imagination took over and shock set in. That skeleton once was a person, someone with a life of her own (I was convinced it was a small woman), with joys and sadness, hopes and dreams, but she couldn't have expected to end up as dry bones hidden away in a box. Who was she? What happened and why? Was she dead when sealed up, or did death come slowly, locked in a dark box—too horrible a thought to contemplate, like Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," which would give anyone chills.

A fantasy began in my mind. She was young, blonde, and beautiful of course, a schoolteacher, a churchgoer, an all around small-town girl come to the city. But she fell in love with a scoundrel who cheated on her; she confronted him, and he strangled her. I was so close to working out a novel in my head that I named the skeleton. Maybe it was those wisps of once-flowered material, but she made me think of Miranda from *The Tempest*. That, I decided was how I would think of her instead of "the skeleton."

Could the police solve a mystery all these years later? I assumed it was many, many years, and yet to let it go unsolved seemed barbaric. And the idea of rats and mice—I didn't want to think about that again either. It made my flesh crawl. At last I drifted into a troubled sleep, but the ringing phone startled me awake.

When I mumbled "Hello," a deep voice said, "Forget about the skeleton. Don't investigate or you'll be sorry." Whoever was on the other end slammed the phone down in my ear. I looked at the clock: three o'clock, and for me, sleep was over for the night. Who would call with that strange, threatening message? Who, besides me, could care about an old skeleton? And how did they know so quickly? Should I call Mike Shandy? No, he'd just tell me to lock my doors and let the police handle it. A hidden place deep inside me was scared, but I was also angry. Nobody was going to threaten me. I'd learned a lot in the three years I'd been single, and protecting myself and the girls was the biggest lesson. I got up to check them, but they were sleeping peacefully. Once back in bed, the endless questions played themselves in my mind. Who was Miranda? How did she get there? And how long ago? Why?

Sleep came again fitfully at dawn, less than an hour before the alarm went off. Sleepless though the night had been, I turned off the alarm and got right up. In that space of time before the girls were up, I sipped coffee and read the newspaper. Once, Tim and I employed an agent who never read the paper. I was almost firm with the woman about how important keeping current was. After all, the business section had lots about real estate trends and developments, and the general news was important. You couldn't talk to clients and say, "What hijacking?" when the news the day before spent six hours following the travels of a truck and its woman driver hijacked by a man she did not know. No, I was convinced it was important to know what went on in the world but also to know what went on locally. Besides, I loved reading the local news in the peace and quiet of the early morning. It was one of my favorite times of day.

On page three of the city news section, in the "Local Briefs" column, there was a piece about a skeleton being found in a house under renovation in the Fairmount addition. It gave the address of the house and said that the remains had been sent to the county coroner's office for possible identification, adding that authorities were not yet sure of the gender or age of the victim nor when the death occurred. I didn't learn anything from reading it, but I wished that O'Connell and Spencer Realtors were mentioned—anything for publicity. On second thought it occurred to me that maybe the omission was good—future buyers might be turned off by a house that held a skeleton for who-knew-how-many years. As it was, curiosity seekers would drive down Fairmount today, just to see the house where a skeleton was found. And they'd see the O'Connell and Spencer sign out front. The article could bring forth someone who knew something. It might work to my advantage and to that of the police. In the bright light of a Texas morning, a skeleton seemed more of a curiosity than a threat, worth only a mention in the local brief news. I decided not to tell Mike Shandy about that strange call in the early morning hours.