

Walking Death's Acre

True confession time: for a woman who makes her living writing extremely diabolical suspense novels, I have no stomach for gore. Scary movies? Can't watch them. Most of the crime shows on prime time? Egads, no way! Haunted houses? My husband has had to carry me out. It's embarrassing but true.

So when I first received the invitation to conduct research at the famed Body Farm at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I didn't know what to do with myself. As a forensics aficionado and thriller author, I just *had* to visit. A chance to learn first-hand how to search for buried remains? Or how to establish time of death for skeletal remains? Or the amount of forensic evidence that can still be retrieved from cremated bones? Sign me up!

On the other hand, this would involve walking the fabled Death's Acre, which generally features several hundred decomposing bodies. I had to consider not just what I was going to see, but what I was going to smell, touch, feel. The squeamish mom in me worried I wouldn't be able to take it. And no one wants to be the one who barfs in front of trained professionals.

What's a girl gonna do? Of course I went.

The Anthropological Research Facility, aka the Body Farm, was founded in the early '80s by Dr. William Bass. Up until then, the discovery of decomposed remains often led to a time of death plus or minus several years. Obviously, this complicated the homicide investigation. Dr. Bass's solution: bury a body, see how long it took to skeletonize, and scientifically establish a rate of decomp.

Of course, many variables immediately came into play: buried or unburied, clothed or unclothed, hot humid conditions, cold frosty conditions, animal activity, insect activity, etc., etc. In the end, Dr. Bass couldn't bury one body, he needed hundreds. Some donations were unclaimed remains from the ME's office. Hundreds of others are directed donations from people who wanted to contribute to the advancement of science after their death.

This kind of generosity makes Death's Acre less a macabre wooded plot and more like hallowed ground. Instead of listening to anthropologists merely analyze body parts, I heard stories of people and families, of victims and criminal prosecutions, of crafty

LISA GARDNER

murderers and even craftier forensics experts. I learned of stories told in bone.

Interestingly enough, the more the head anthropologist Dr. Lee Jantz humanized the remains we studied, the more bearable I found the sights and smells to be. When I cradled the feather-light cranial plate of a newborn infant in my hand, I could both marvel as its rose petal size and feel the weight of one parent's heart-breaking contribution. I was both mesmerized by the skeleton collection, which took up endless rows of metal shelves, and amazed by how a scientist such as Dr. Jantz could pick up a single piece of cremated bone and tell you the person's gender, approximate age, chronic health conditions and probable occupation.

Bones, I learned, aren't just body parts, but an organic record of who we are, what we did, where we lived, and often, how we died. And in the right hands, bones allow the dead to speak. Think a murderer can cover his tracks with a burn barrel and lighter fluid? Think again. Think you can thwart time of death by freezing remains? Nope. Think you can get away with murder? Thanks to forensic anthropologists such as Dr. Jantz, not likely.

I came to the Body Farm expecting to be immersed in death, and instead, found a new appreciation for life. And while my family still refuses to let me tell stories about my research over dinner, I had a great time working with the anthropologists on my March 2011 release *Love You More*. Just remember, when you come to the key scene in the snowy woods—you'll know which one I'm talking about—I worked for that scene.

I walked Death's Acre, and I never threw up.