

THE
UNQUIET
BONES

A NOVEL

AUTHOR OF THE MAID'S DIARY

LORETH ANNE
WHITE

PRAISE FOR *THE PATIENT'S SECRET*

“[An] exceptional psychological thriller . . . White does a superb job keeping the reader guessing as she peels back the layers of a seemingly perfect family to reveal the shocking truth. Suspense fans will want to see more from this talented author.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“*The Patient's Secret* is an intensely moving reading experience . . . Loreth Anne White is a writer at the top of her game, and it's never been more evident than with this piece of work.”

—*Mystery & Suspense Magazine*

PRAISE FOR *BENEATH DEVIL'S BRIDGE*

“The suspenseful, multilayered plot is matched by fully realized characters. White consistently entertains.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“If I'm lucky, maybe once in a blue moon, I read a book that leaves my mind reeling, heart aching, and soul searching. One that haunts me long after *The End*. *Beneath Devil's Bridge* is one of those books.”

—*Mystery & Suspense Magazine*

PRAISE FOR *IN THE DEEP*

“Convincing character development and a denouement worthy of Agatha Christie make this a winner. White has outdone herself.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“This page-turner is tightly written with a moody sense of place in the small coastal community, but it is the numerous twists that will keep readers thoroughly absorbed. A satisfyingly creepy psychological thriller.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

PRAISE FOR *IN THE DARK*

“White (*The Dark Bones*) employs kaleidoscopic perspectives in this tense modern adaptation of Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None*. White’s structural sleight of hand as she shifts between narrators and timelines keeps the suspense high . . . Christie fans will find this taut, clever thriller to be a worthy homage to the original.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“White excels at the chilling romantic thriller.”

—The Amazon Book Review

“*In the Dark* is a brilliantly constructed Swiss watch of a thriller, containing both a chilling locked-room mystery reminiscent of Agatha Christie and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and a detective story that would make Harry Bosch proud. Do yourself a favor and find some uninterrupted reading time, because you won’t want to put this book down.”

—Jason Pinter, bestselling author of the Henry Parker series

PRAISE FOR LORETH ANNE WHITE

“A masterfully written, gritty, suspenseful thriller with a tough, resourceful protagonist that hooked me and kept me guessing until the very end. Think C. J. Box and Craig Johnson. Loreth Anne White’s *The Dark Bones* is that good.”

—Robert Dugoni, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Eighth Sister*

“Secrets, lies, and betrayal converge in this heart-pounding thriller that features a love story as fascinating as the mystery itself.”

—Iris Johansen, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Smokescreen*

“A riveting, atmospheric suspense novel about the cost of betrayal and the power of redemption, *The Dark Bones* grips the reader from the first page to the pulse-pounding conclusion.”

—Kylie Brant, Amazon Charts bestselling author of *Pretty Girls Dancing*

“Loreth Anne White has set the gold standard for the genre.”

—Debra Webb, *USA Today* bestselling author

“Loreth Anne White has a talent for setting and mood. *The Dark Bones* hooked me from the start. A chilling and emotional read.”

—T. R. Ragan, author of *Her Last Day*

“A must-read, *A Dark Lure* is gritty, dark romantic suspense at its best. A damaged yet resilient heroine, a deeply conflicted cop, and a truly terrifying villain collide in a stunning conclusion that will leave you breathless.”

—Melinda Leigh, *Wall Street Journal* and Amazon Charts bestselling author

**THE
UNQUIET
BONES**

OTHER TITLES BY LORETH ANNE WHITE

The Maid's Diary
The Patient's Secret
Beneath Devil's Bridge
In the Deep
In the Dark
The Dark Bones
In the Barren Ground
In the Waning Light
A Dark Lure
The Slow Burn of Silence

Angie Pallorino Novels

The Drowned Girls
The Lullaby Girl
The Girl in the Moss

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A NOVEL

LORETH ANNE
WHITE

 Montlake

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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First edition

For my mom.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our
bed and eats at our own table.

—W. H. Auden

NOTE TO THE READER

The Unquiet Bones touches on themes around generational trauma that might be triggering for some readers.

THE UNEARTHING

April 2023

A steady rain falls as Benjamin and Raphael Duvalier work their excavator alongside a dark lake on the misted flanks of Hemlock Mountain. The brothers are digging up the concrete foundations of an old and tiny wooden A-frame chapel. The chapel is located at the Hemlock Ski Resort area base and is being moved higher into the alpine to make way for an expansion. It's barely dawn, and the temperature hovers around freezing. Behind them the forest creeps down the mountain and wraiths of mist finger between the trees. Empty lift chairs hang motionless on cables that disappear into the low clouds.

Benjamin claps his gloved hands together, trying to get blood to flow into his frozen fingers. This wet cold is far worse than dryer temperatures well below freezing. His brother is at least warmer inside the excavator cab. Raphael pulls the hydraulic control and scoops up another load of concrete and damp earth. He swivels the bucket out over the bed of a waiting truck and dumps its contents inside. The big vehicle sinks a little under the fresh weight.

Using the back of his glove, Benjamin swipes rain from his face and then points to the ground, showing his brother where to dig next. The excavator bucket swings back. Raphael moves the lever. The bucket lowers to the ground, and the teeth dig into black soil. He moves his controls again and begins to scoop.

The bucket's teeth hook something and jerk it free of the earth. Benjamin's heart jumps. He hurriedly steps forward in an effort to process what he's seeing.

"Whoa! Whoa. Stop!" he screams, shooting his hand into the air and making a slicing motion across his neck.

Raphael halts the excavator arm. He hops down from the cab and runs over to where Benjamin has crouched. Benjamin carefully brushes damp soil off the long object that has been pulled up in the dirt. His heart hammers. He glances at Raphael.

They have hooked two big, long bones.

Benjamin knows they are not from a large animal because the thing hanging off the end of them is a boot.

A woman's boot with a platform heel.

JANE

Sergeant Jane Munro forces herself to concentrate on the words coming out the mouth of the emaciated blonde seated across from her in the church basement semicircle.

“I’m exhausted,” the woman laments. “To the core of my bones. All. Of. The. Time.”

Her name is Stephanie. She’s a mom. Or was. *What do you call a mother whose child is missing, simply gone?*

“My friends say I should return to work, but I can’t.” Stephanie fidgets with a tattered tissue in her lap. Her body matches her voice: ragged, reedy, broken. Her eyes are red-rimmed and puffy. That’s the thing about support groups: lots of crying. It makes Jane tense. She’s a cop. Not just any cop—a veteran homicide investigator. She’s trained her entire adult life to *not* cry, or at least not in public, and her body and mind are at war in this church basement because while she is sympathetic to Stephanie’s plight, feeling too much empathy threatens Jane’s grip on her own emotions. She can’t afford to crack. She’d split open, and her guts would spill all over the place—she’s not sure she’d ever be able to gather the parts back into her skin if she did.

“I’m afraid to leave the house because what if Jason comes home?” Stephanie asks. “He won’t know where to find me.” She blows her nose with that damp, ragged tissue while the group murmurs in agreement.

Jason is Stephanie’s eight-year-old son. He vanished one afternoon fourteen months ago, never to be seen or heard from again.

There are seven other similarly afflicted souls seated with Jane on orange plastic chairs that have been arranged in a semicircle to face a therapist who volunteers her time. They’re gathered downstairs in the community center attached to the Our Lady of the Bay Church. A chill spring rain falls outside, and the sky is low with gunmetal-gray clouds.

But down here, beneath overly bright and institutional fluorescent lights, it's too warm and the room stinks of stale coffee and the sugary smell of deep-fried donuts. The group members come from different walks of life and vary in age, but they all have one terrible thing in common. They're all struggling to cope with the strange grief that attaches when a loved one goes missing.

Not dead.

Simply *gone*.

One day they are going about ordinary life, the next they are absent. Vanished as if into thin air, leaving a thrumming, pulsing, living, breathing hole that won't die. Or live. It's a hellish kind of limbo, this not knowing. This waiting with no fixed end point. Most people who have not gone through this trauma find it impossible to understand.

"I totally get you," says a father seated to Stephanie's right. His name is Christopher—the members are on first-name terms only, sharing just as much as they are comfortable with. Jane is not comfortable. Not with any of it. Christopher has clearly come straight from some kind of construction or road work. He wears heavy-weight jeans, and his steel-toed boots are covered with mud. His hands are rough and chapped. Like Jane, he's probably taken a late lunch in order to attend group. Christopher mentioned earlier that he recently turned fifty-five, but to Jane he looks at least ten years older. Two years ago, his eighteen-year-old daughter went to a nightclub downtown with friends. She never came home. Christopher and his wife still have no answers. They've since divorced. As Stephanie has. This purgatory takes a toll in so many subversive ways. It sparks fissures through even the most solid of families. It carves off friends. Erodes confidence. Shatters a sense of self. Sabotages one's job.

Jane is intimate with the job-sabotage aspect. After a recent "episode" at work that almost cost a high-profile homicide case, she has been temporarily relegated to a cold case—or "special investigations"—unit of essentially one. Her boss at first suggested taking time off work, or perhaps starting her maternity leave early. But Jane can't take time off. She's terrified of being home alone with her thoughts. She *needs* to work. Her boss then suggested counseling. Which is why she's here now, sitting against her will in an orange plastic chair in an overly hot church

basement listening to people like Stephanie and Christopher who have not managed to solve anything and will be of no help to her.

“It’s like you can’t even grieve,” Christopher says. “Grieving feels like a betrayal, like you’ve given up. Meanwhile the whole world just starts to move on without you.” He glances down at his chapped hands and says quietly, “Sometimes I feel like a glob of old blue toothpaste stuck in the basin that just won’t wash down the drain. Stuck there and drying out.”

Jane swallows. She knows the stats. She’s keenly aware that the odds of him ever seeing his daughter again are nil. Christopher and his ex-wife will be lucky to just locate her remains one day, to have a chance to say a proper goodbye via a burial or cremation. Same with Stephanie and her little boy. Same with all of them. Her eyes suddenly burn, and her gaze darts to the basement window, seeking escape. She clenches her fists, fixates on the grimy pane streaked with rain and mud as she fights to hold in tears. *Just get through this. Survive one meeting. Preferably without saying anything. Don’t cry. Get angry. Angry is easier. Stay angry.*

“I just want to know what happened to my baby. That’s all. Even if I can’t have him back.” Stephanie dabs her red nose with the snotted tissue.

Jane’s blood pressure peaks. There’s a whole goddamn box of fresh Kleenex on the low table in front of Stephanie. Why in heaven’s name can’t the miserable woman take a clean tissue? Can’t she *see* them? Perspiration prickles above Jane’s lip. Panic tickles in her stomach. It’s the start of a claustrophobia attack—she’s going to be buried alive. She’s never going to escape this hot basement, these sorry people, the stink of stale coffee.

“Closure,” says someone else. “We all just need closure. Either a license to properly grieve, or to have them come home.”

Stephanie nods and tries to reopen her tattered tissue.

The therapist leans forward and shoves the Kleenex box closer to Stephanie, who finally—thank heaven—takes a fresh tissue.

The therapist says, “This physical and psychological exhaustion is completely normal. When a loved one disappears, either in body or—in some cases, as with dementia—in mind, it can be the most stressful type of loss. A type that lacks answers. Unclear, indeterminate. No boundaries

or resolution. It manifests in ways similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. And you're all correct, it's not properly acknowledged by society in general. As you've all noted, there's this perception that the world is moving on, yet you are unable to move with it, and this creates feelings of dissonance and isolation. Which is why groups like this are important. To share. To know we are not alone. It really does help to identify with others who understand what you're going through. And it's important to know this type of loss has a name. Ambiguous loss. Or grief limbo." The facilitator looks directly at Jane. "Would anyone else like to share today?"

Jane casts her eyes down and focuses on a spot on her knee. She feels the heat of everyone's attention turn to her.

"Jane?" asks the therapist.

Jane clears her throat but continues to stare intently at her knee.

"Jane?"

She glances up sharply. "Look, we all know the stats. We have the highest number of missing persons reports per capita in our province. In BC alone, well over thirteen thousand adults and five thousand kids go missing each year. To be realistic, most of those are never—"

"Jane," the facilitator says in a warning tone. "Perhaps you'd like to start with what brought you here?"

"No, I—I'm good. Thanks."

They all stare at her.

She failed.

She planned to sit through one session and not say a thing. Now she's opened her damn mouth, and her emotions are already simmering right at the surface. Her sinuses are thick with it. Her throat aches from the tension of holding it in. Her head pounds. She knows that if she dares to speak Matt's name out loud, she'll crumple into a sodden heap like Stephanie's tissue.

She draws in a deep, slow, steadying breath, and very quietly, she says, "I'm not quite ready."

"That's fine. Perfectly fine," says the therapist.

The slender and well-dressed dark-haired man sitting to Jane's right leans forward. He meets Jane's gaze with a gentle but commanding presence. The kind of presence Jane can relate to.

“It took me a while to be able to voice my loss,” he says. “It’s been fourteen months now, since my wife vanished. I still shop for her at the grocery store. I’m always searching for her in crowds. Sometimes I even think I see her on the SkyTrain, and my heart races before my brain can even engage. I still jump like a live wire every time my cell rings. And —” He heaves out a big sigh. “Anger. I am so quick to enrage, and I take it out on people who are only trying to help. But no one can ever say the right thing, can they?” He pauses, holding Jane’s attention. “Because there is no right thing to say.”

“Closure,” Stephanie murmurs again. “We all just need some closure.”

I don't need closure. I'm going to find Matt. Alive. He's not gone, he can't be. I'm not prepared to capitulate. I believe with all my heart he's out there somewhere.

The therapist says, “We need to bear in mind that in the context of ambiguous loss, ‘closure’ is a myth. It’s easy to succumb to intense societal pressure to ‘find closure,’ and this message is drummed home by the media, reinforced in movies and in novels. It’s echoed in comments from friends and family. We live in a society that places high value on resolving problems, on finding solutions, on ‘getting over’ things quickly. But when society is faced with people who are missing, there’s a disconnect, a discomfort. They don’t know how to cope with people who are missing loved ones, or with situations that actually have no answers or resolutions. We should not be forced to chase closure,” she warns. “What we need to find are ways to coexist with our complex feelings, and to always remember that our reactions are completely normal.” She glances at Jane. “They’re not a sign of personal weakness.”

This does not sit at all well with Jane. She’s a fixer. She solves and resolves. Takes action. Gets answers. Finds bad guys. Closes cases. Punishes perpetrators.

Her phone vibrates on silent in her pocket. She considers ignoring it. The group rule states no phones. It vibrates again. It promises escape. Jane opens her blazer pocket and awkwardly peers at her mobile’s screen. Her pulse quickens. It’s a text from her boss.

Call me. Human remains located. Historic. Suspicious circumstances.

She immediately surges to her feet with a rush of almost gleeful energy. "I need to make a call."

"We have a strict no-phone rule," Stephanie snaps.

Jane ignores her and makes quickly for the coatrack near the exit door. She feels the eyes of the group burning into her back. She moves faster, trying to outrun an irrational feeling they might claw her back into the circle. She grabs her coat off the hook, then hesitates as guilt rises in her chest. She turns to face them. "I'm sorry. It's an emergency."

"Like what?" Stephanie's tone is mocking and angry now. "Did someone *die*?"

Jane pushes her arms into her coat. "Yeah, actually. Someone did." She reaches for the door handle, but their miserable faces make her waver. "I really am sorry," she says quietly, then pushes out the door.

Jane makes her way up the stairs and out the church building's doors. The cold, damp air hits her like lifeblood. She stands for a moment under the portico and sucks it deep into her lungs. Once she's composed herself, she calls her superior in the homicide unit at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters in Surrey.

He answers immediately.

"Jane. Human remains were unearthed early this morning at the Hemlock Ski Resort base during some construction. Likely historical. Anthropologist and coroner are on site. How do you feel about taking the lead on this one?"

Her hand tightens on the phone as excitement tingles through her body. She also hears the caution in his tone. He's wary of how she will handle this. Jane modulates her response.

"Are the remains suspicious?"

"It's a crime scene until we have evidence to the contrary. How soon can you be there?"

She glances at her watch. "Give me twenty." It's a lie. It'll probably take longer, but she's desperate for this diversion.

"Take Murtagh to assist. You'll be based out of the North Van detachment for this one. Ramp up as you see fit, and keep me apprised." The line goes dead.

Jane closes her eyes and places her hand on her pregnant belly.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. This I can control.

She pulls her hood over her head, steps into the pouring rain, and strides purposefully to her car as her mind races ahead. She needs to pick up boots at her apartment. It'll be muddy, possibly even snowy, on Hemlock. Her apartment is on the way. She beeps her lock, climbs into her vehicle, starts the engine. While waiting for the windows to defog, she calls Corporal Duncan Murtagh and tells him to meet her at the Hemlock Ski Resort base. She flips down her sun visor, where she keeps a photo of her fiancé, Matt Rossi. He smiles back at her. Tanned and fit and strong and so full of life. Jane's chest tightens. She touches her fingertips gently to his face, then flips the visor back up. She pulls out of the parking space and feeds into busy city traffic, aiming for the bridge that will take her over to the North Shore. From there she will head east and drive up the snaking switchbacks of Hemlock Mountain. As she drives, she hopes to hell this turns out to be a homicide, because she needs this.