

# DIGGING UP BONES



ROBIN SMITH

Digging Up Bones  
*by Robin Smith*

**Newsite Web Services Publishing**

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First published in 2006, 2006

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This book is dedicated to K. A. Smith and one special trip out  
to the back-end of Utah.

Fun times and fossils, and they still don't make  
Brontoburgers.

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locales, and events are either a product of the author's  
imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance  
to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

## Chapter One

"Oh, hell."

The exclamation fell out of her and landed with a sizzle on the hot highway shoulder. Kasia Payne stood over it, staring with dismay down the steep incline created by the overpass at the pleasant little truck stop that wasn't there.

There was a general assortment of buildings, just like her last ride had said, huddled around a worn parking lot like pioneer wagons protecting themselves from Indians, and yes, there was the post office and the gas station and the mercantile, and there was even a building with a sign that said 'Drive-In Eats,' but the building was a burned out shell with no roof and the sign was sitting off to one side with the individual letters picked off, perhaps by vultures, leaving only the paler impressions to mark the places they'd stood throughout the years. The bustling wheel of commerce that had been Drive-In Eats was no more, and all its faithful clientele had clearly abandoned the rest of its orbiting pioneers to fate and the elements. That left exactly two pickup trucks in the parking lot below and one of them was up on cinder blocks.

"Hell," Kasia said again, with even less spirit than she had the first time. She unshouldered her pack and let it drop with a thump to the pavement, pulled out her canteen and sat down on the cushion of her meager belongings to take the last two swallows and try to think.

No truck stop. After a two mile hike up the road from Tribulations, and the right turn that had taken her here instead of the left turn onto Highway 191 and over to Provo, no truck stop. No truck stop meant no ride, and no ride meant a whole lot of walking. A lot of walking meant ... well now, just what did that mean? Kasia risked an upwards peek.

The skies burning over Utah in the middle of September this fine morning were stab-you-in-the-eye-blue and cloudless. It was just after ten and already hotter than hell and so dry it felt as though her eyeballs were slowly turning into granite. Her feet were burning, even through the soles of her sneakers—not sore, but actually *burning*, as in 'flame'—and there was a hot, yellow taste to the air that just kind of crawled into your lungs and lay there.

A lot of walking was going to be a bad thing.

Kasia heaved herself up, pocketed her canteen and dragged her pack back up onto her shoulder. She had about fifteen bucks and some change left. She'd go down to the parking lot, see what building looked the most open, and see what there was to see. Sometimes folks off the beaten path like this didn't mind so much if a girl took a bath in the sink and then slept out the day in a store room. At the very least, she'd be able to fill her canteen.

She trudged down off the overpass shoulder and headed on over, feeling sunlight like molten lead on her head and shoulders. Her sneakers scuffed across the cracked, chapped asphalt, and then the cracked, chapped desert ground, and finally the cracked, chapped parking lot.



The lights in the gas station were on, but it looked empty. The doors to the post office were open, but it was dark and somehow not very official-looking. There was a small cabin-y looking brown shack off to one side of the lot, next to an enormous tin water tank, but although it looked like it saw a fair amount of use, there were no signs or hints of any kind to indicate what the heck it was. That left the store, through whose windows Kasia could see an old man in overalls moving around, and so she went toward it, although she was not encouraged.

There were a number of signs hung up around the windows, but they all seemed kind of abstract and faintly ominous to her. Hand-Dipped Cold Drinks, one said. *This Is The Place*, said another, with little quotes around it, and a couple of weathered bumblebees painted at the edges. Opposite that, on a diamond-shaped piece of pressed aluminum, green letters advised her to 'Choose the Right.' On the door itself, beneath the hand-written slate of store hours, was a small sign with a stark message saying, 'Life was Not Intended to be Easy.' There was a string of others, carefully etched on metal plates and mounted along the doorjamb: "Never let a day pass that you will have cause to say, I will do better tomorrow," "He Who Calmed the Seas Will Not Forsake Us," and "There is no cure for the ills of this world except the gospel of Jesus Christ." Over the door, on a plank of wood that looked almost old enough to be petrified, was one word in whitewash: STARVATION.

Kasia stood in front of that door for a long, long time. At last, however, she opened it.

The first thing that struck her was a cool breeze—not a cold one, as it would take an air conditioner roughly the size of a Studebaker to get an edge up on a Utah heat, but cool was good enough and very welcome—and the second was the smell of something sizzling on a nice, greasy griddle. She leaned into the aroma and the breeze, pushing on the door hard to shut it, and became aware of an old man's gravelly voice having one side of a heated debate on oranges.

"It doesn't matter who squeezes the orange," the old man was saying earnestly. "Juice comes out. You could squeeze it, I could squeeze it. Usama Bin Laden could squeeze it! Juice comes out!"

'Oh boy,' thought Kasia, and despite the allure of the little store's climate controls, she found herself looking back through the window at the highway and thinking that it hadn't been all *that* hot...

"S'cuse me for a second, son. Little miss? Welcome to Starvation, honey—Oh, gracious, you look like you're going to fall down dead in the doorway." The old man was coming toward her, wiping his hands on his short-order apron and pruning up with concern so spontaneous and genuine that Kasia felt a little ashamed of herself for her awkwardness of a moment before. "Come on in here and sit down. Got road trouble?"

"You could say that," she said, allowing the old man to lead her down a narrow aisle full of dog food, saddles, and cleaning supplies. "There's a road, anyway, and I don't have a real easy way down it."

"Oh, uh-huh?" The old man sat her down before the high malt-shoppe-pink counter at the back of the store and bustled around to get behind it again. "Car broke down, did it? Let me give my son Mike a call and he'll go fetch it here for you—"

"No, thanks, I didn't come in a car," Kasia said, eyeing the little hand-chalked menu on the back wall with naked yearning. "Um, could I have a water, please?"

A tall glass, wet and brittle-ly cold, was set before her on a napkin. The old man's face had pruned up again. "No car? Honey, you ain't walkin' out there!" A quaver at the end of his words put it halfway between a question and an exclamation, but in either case, the answer was the same.

"Yes, sir," she said, and drank.

"Well, where are you headed? I'll get Mike out here and give you a lift, it ain't no trouble at—"

"Georgia coastline," she answered, setting the empty glass down. "Thanks anyway, though."

"Oh." He continued to stand there, nonplussed, for a beat or two before comprehension flooded his face and lent it profound gravity. "Oh, little miss, you ain't *hitchin'*, are you?"

He said *hitchin'* as if it meant *whorin'*. Kasia fished an ice cube out of her glass, wrapped it in a napkin, and rubbed at her eyes with it. She nodded, forcing a smile and feeling tired. "And before you ask, no, I'm not a runaway; no, I'm not in trouble with the law; yes, I know what I'm doing; and yes, my parents know where I am." That last one wasn't strictly true, but she doubted it would come as a shock to either of them, assuming they could be found and prompted to remember who she was. "I've been living in Seattle for a

while, and now I just need to get somewhere warm and easy for the winter."

The old man looked at her, his eyes now almost buried by furrowed, frowning wrinkles. "Do you have a home, honey?" he asked quietly.

She smiled at him, a little more easily this time. "No, sir. But I'm okay, I swear."

"You shouldn't ought to be hitching," the old man said stubbornly, sorrowfully. "Bring you to a bad end."

"You allergic to work?" someone asked suddenly, and Kasia just about fell off the stool trying to jump and look around at the same time.

There was a man sitting on her right, a man who had gone completely unnoticed all this time, between the whole ice-water and interrogation thing. He had his elbow on the table and his chin in one hand, sitting easy just two stools down with his foot up on the kick bar. There was a plate with half a bacon sandwich on it in front of him and the dregs of an orange soda; he was chewing idly on the straw. He looked about mid-thirties, but he wore it young. He had a thick head of hair that looked like it was trying very hard to jump off his head, strong bones and a clear complexion, and a sporty little black Van Dyke to put a point on an otherwise square jaw. Add to that a pair of intense Gypsy eyes and it was kind of hard to see beyond to the rest of him.

Her first thought was, *Damn, that's a good-looking guy*, and it took her a little time to regroup from that. Her second was, *What did he—gosh, really good looking!—just say?*, and

her third was, *And just what the hell gives him the right to say it to me!*

"No, I'm not allergic to work!" she sputtered, the fires of her initial attraction freezing immediately over. "And I pay taxes and I never took a dime off the government after I turned sixteen! I work everywhere I go and I bet I work harder than any six people you know!"

The stranger showed his teeth (and his straw) in a quick grin. "That a fact?"

"That's a fact!" Kasia dropped her pack in a dusty heap on the floor and held out her upturned palms defiantly, displaying the scars and yellowed calluses that ridged and pocked and whorled across her hands. "That's four months on a landscaping crew in Seattle, buster, and three weeks picking oranges in California!"

The stranger leaned in to have a closer look, prodding at one of her fingers like he was kicking a tire on a car he meant to buy.

Kasia snatched her hand back, locked both of them around her empty water glass, and glared at him. "So there!"

"Ha." The stranger rolled back to face the old man, pointing at Kasia with his chewed-on straw. "Let's get a plate of something and some more water for this one," he said, making it sound like a completely original idea, something that ought to be patented, perhaps. "I've got a business proposition for you," he added, before Kasia could even begin to hotly refuse his hospitality. "But I'm going to need to butter you up first, because it's clear you don't harbor a lot of trust for strange men in small towns."

"You know me so well, then you know what you can do with your 'business' proposition," she countered, but her eye kept getting distracted by the eggs and bacon that the old man was heating up on the griddle. "I'm going to eat that food," she announced, "But don't think for one second that entitles you to a damn thing!"

"Check that gutter talk, honey," the old man remarked.

"Sorry," she grumbled. "But the sentiment stands."

"Fair enough." Unruffled, the stranger stuck out his hand. "I'm Esben. Professor Emory Esben, a pleasure and a privilege to meet you. Call me Ez."

Kasia ignored the hand and turned her head to run a huffy eye over the merchandise crowding the diner's corner. Undaunted, the straw-chewing Ez took a handful of her hair, gave it two quick pumps in a gentleman's shake, and let go before she could react.

"What would you say to six weeks alone with me in the desert under the hot sun digging up fifty-pound blocks of fossils with a garden trowel?" he said cheerfully, and immediately held up both hands like a man at a mugging. "Oh, but wait, there's more! You get your own tent, air mattress, sleeping bag and not one but two pillows! There's a chair and a deck of cards, flashlights in every color of God's rainbow, and all the comforts of home, provided you live in Outer Dustbonia, not to mention companionship in the form of me, Professor Ez. Once or twice a day, I do stop talking."

A breakfast was set before her, and Kasia's objections were neatly derailed by saliva.

Ez continued, "On top of the rewarding glow of honest labor, you will receive fifty dollars a day for six days each week, provided you stay the course and finish out the field trip. At the end of six weeks, or until the weather turns, whichever comes first, you will accompany me back to BYU where I will draft you a check for eighteen hundred dollars and put you on a Greyhound bus to the city of your choice. I'll need a W-2 and all that, of course. Everything fair and above board." Solicitation spent, Ez dropped both hands to the countertop and folded them neatly, watching her eat and awaiting her reply.

"I don't wander off into the desert with people I don't know," she said, eyeing him suspiciously over a biscuit.

"What do you want to know? My middle name's Tyler, if that's a help to you. Let's see ... I'm a Virgo, which means I'm restrained, shy, and very serious, but I try to come out of my shell when there's company around." Ez pushed out his jaw and nibbled so that the tip of his straw bobbed up and down as he contemplated himself. "I was an eggplant in my third-grade class play on the subject of nutrition and I blew my only line in front of at least fifty people when I announced to an audience of innocent and unsuspecting parents that, through the aid of modern science, many vegetables have adapted themselves to a carnivorous diet."

"All right, all right, enough!" Kasia fought her way through the mental image of a snarling eggplant and got back to the salient issue. "You can say anything you want, but what it all boils down to is that you're still a total stranger!"

"Yeah, well, there's not a whole lot I can do about that, but Pops here has seen you talking to me, so if you're really afraid I'm going to drag you off and murder you, at least you'd have the satisfaction of knowing I'd be caught right away." He rolled his eyes at her expression and threw out his arms as though to display his inherent ineffableness. "I'm not going to drag you off and murder you, for Pete's sake! I'm a paleontologist!"

"You're a what?"

"Dinosaur bones," Ez said, picking up the other half of his sandwich and setting to with a vigor. "I dig up dinosaur bones for Brigham Young University, and as it happens, the season is over, my students went home, my assistant had to bail on me, and I'm in a real bind. Now what do you say? Six weeks, hard work, decent pay, no funny stuff."

"But..."

"I don't think Pops has any tasers or pepper spray on the shelves," Ez added, giving the store's goods a dubious eyeing-over. "But I suppose I could pick you up a can of lemon Endust. That wouldn't do me any good if I caught a dose between the eyes."

"Well..." She was weakening and her plate was almost empty.

"We'll have to take turns cooking, but apart from that and the backbreaking labor in a dark pit, the work-load's light. I make a mean pot of chili mac and I'm no good at any of the board games I brought." Ez peered a little closer at her, drumming his nails on the counter, and then snapped his fingers and said, "Pops here has a washer-dryer and a set of



showers in the shack out back for paleontologists to use, but I don't believe they're available to hitch-hikers, are they, Pops?"

The old man wiped his hands on his apron, looking from one to the other of them. "Guess not," he said at last.

"So what do you say?" Ez leaned back and watched her mop up the last of her yolk with the last of her biscuit. "Got a name?"

Kasia chewed her final bit of breakfast and looked out the window at the overpass. It sounded like a pretty good deal, actually. On the surface, anyway. Fifty bucks a day...

She wouldn't swear to the fact that this guy Ez was exactly harmless, but ostentatiousness was a good start. When you were on the road a lot, you learned to distrust anyone who acted really normal. She thought this guy was okay. Really good-looking though, and that could be a problem. But fifty bucks a day...

"Payne," she said slowly. "Kasia Payne."

"Welcome aboard, Kasia Payne!" Ez's hand swooped around and caught hers up in an exuberant clasp. "Oh, it's going to be a great time! Go get yourself a shower! It'll be a week before you get another one! What fun!"

\* \* \* \*

Gosh, it was nice to have someone to talk to again.

The girl had cleaned up pretty good after she'd taken about ten pounds of red Utah dust off of her, and she'd evidently had a spare set of clothes in that beat-up pack she was guarding, and now, fresh-faced and riding shotgun in a

climate-controlled pickup truck, she even looked a little cheerful. At least, she'd lost that edgy, suspicious squint and that had to count for something.

Ez left the skeletal remains of Starvation in the rearview mirror and aimed his fuzzy dice at the mountains, chattering comfortably about anything that popped into his mind and making occasional efforts to include his new assistant in the conversation. So far, she hadn't said much, but he didn't let that bother him. He was well-accustomed to having to do all the talking.

"—We've got a big can of funny spray that we use around the perimeter to kind of keep the snakes out," he was saying now. "It's non-toxic, but they don't like crawling through it. Or slithering, I should say. I guess you need knees to crawl, but snakes seem to have a pretty good outlook on life without knees. Never heard one complain, anyway. Scorpions, though, they can be a problem if they move in, so don't let them move in. Keep your shoes and your pack and pretty much all your stuff inside your tent with the zipper sealed at all times. Make sure everything that can be moved is inside the trailer at night with the door closed and check out the dig thoroughly with your flashlight before you go inside. They're not poisonous, not the ones I've seen out there anyway, but they still hurt and you'll swell up some if you're allergic."

"How do you know if you're allergic or not?" she asked, looking distracted and only peripherally interested.

"Well, first you get stung, I guess, and then you see whether or not you swell up. I've got a first aid kit with some stuff that'll help if you *are* allergic, incidentally, but it

shouldn't be a problem either way. Just keep the site clean, tent closed, everything inside."

She nodded and turned back to the window.

"Seriously, say it back to me like you were paying attention."

"Tent closed, stuff inside, site clean, check the dig with a flashlight," she echoed obediently.

Funny. Out here in the field, Ez was used to dealing with only two kinds of people: the ones who knew exactly what they were doing and did it efficiently and well, and the ones who eagerly and apprehensively looked forward to learning. Kasia Payne and her weathered mode of surface acceptance was a whole new bird for Ez.

"Good." He stole a glance at her from the corner of his eyes and put on his Professor-face. "There aren't many rules out here, but the ones I have are hard and fast ones. I need you to listen up and say you understand them before we go any further."

"What happens if I break a few?" she asked, indicating she was teasing with a wan little smile.

"You get a spanking," he replied, grinning back at her.

She laughed. Cute kid, she probably thought he was joking.

"And neither of us want that," he went on, "so pay attention. First rule: Scorpion Preparedness. Second Rule: Buddy Up. You don't go any further than the Biffy Rock unless I'm with you. Seriously. You wouldn't think it's possible to get lost in all this flat, but it happens."

Actually, the flat had given way some time ago to craggy little thrusts of hill and plateaus, steadily climbing up the red bluffs that Utahans called 'mountains'. The girl looked out at the horizon and nodded again, looking solemnly thoughtful. "I believe it," she said. "Stay together. Check."

"Third Rule: No Cussin'. This is my dig and I am King, and I am not going to wade through an audial cesspool to work in it. Keep it clean, please."

"No swearing," she agreed, looking amused. "Got it."

"Last but not least: Never ever ever try to cover up a mistake. Ever. If you lose a bone or mix the plaster too thin or put a decimal in the wrong place in the books, all that's fine and forgivable, but don't try to sweep it under a rug without telling me. Anything that you slip by me in the field is going to make me look like a goober when we get back to civilization and I am just awfully protective of my reputation. Zero tolerance on this one. If you mess up, come clean."

"You break it, you buy it," she said. "Is that it?"

"That's it. I told you there weren't a lot of rules, and they're mostly for safety's sake." Ez glanced at her again, putting a point on his next words and taking delicate aim. "A person's safety is something that nobody should take lightly. Wouldn't you agree?"

There was a faint beetling between the girl's brows, evidence of a direct hit, but she only turned innocently to the window and said, "Absolutely."

He could have just let it go at that, he supposed, and maybe he should have. He hardly knew her, for one thing, and all of her prickly defensive barriers were probably up and

at full strength. For another, she obviously wasn't some angst-ridden teenager indulging herself in mindless social rebellion, she was homeless. That wasn't something a girl could just wake up one day and fix, and she sure as heck wouldn't appreciate having him trot out anything sanctimonious-sounding when there was nothing she could do about it, but there were some things Ez just couldn't let sit.

"We only get one life," Ez said cautiously. "It's up to us to make the right decisions with it." He spared her another covert glance, but her face was a mask and it gave nothing away. "And failing that, it's up to us to make ourselves responsible for drawing a person's attention when that person may be making the wrong decision."

"Uh huh."

Flat. Stony. No opening of any kind in that hostile sound of agreement. Oh well. Nothing he could do now but hold his nose and take the plunge.

"So I'm going to say this once, just once, and never bring it up again, but if you were my daughter, I'd have things to say about you hitching rides across the country."

"I'm sure you would, if I were your daughter." Kasia kept her face pointed straight out the window, so he was spared having to endure the hot daggers of her eyes, but her anger came through despite all her obvious effort to keep her voice level and calm. "But if you were my father, you wouldn't have Thing One to say because you'd have cut out on me when I was three to go live for keeps with the mommy you *married*. And if you were my mother, for that matter, you still wouldn't be saying much because you'd be too busy jumping from

rehab to back alleys and back again to remember my name much less care about how I make it from one state to another. And if you were any of my foster parents—"

She cut off there, throwing the truck into stark silence, and faced the window without moving.

Well, he may not have known better than to bring it up, but he sure knew better than to dig himself in any deeper. Ez kept quiet and drove.

"Most girls who have been on their own as long as I have are hooking or doing drugs," she said finally. "I don't and I never have. What do I do? I hitch rides. What do you got to say to that, *Dad?*"

It had the sound of a rhetorical question, but Ez found he just couldn't not answer that one.

"I say that the worst of the world's problems happen not because of conflict, but because of people who turn a blind eye to that conflict," he said quietly. "And I say that if you're going to work for me, you need to get used to the idea that I have the right, if not the human obligation, to care about your welfare. I further say that no matter how street smart you are or how lucky you are, when you let yourself live a dangerous lifestyle, eventually, it will catch up to you."

She glanced at him, still tight-lipped, but with slightly less outright hostility smoldering in her eyes.

"I'm aware of the reality of certain situations," Ez said. "I know it's not as easy as just waving a magic wand and making a house and a car and a 401K appear."

"And yet, you feel compelled to ride my ass about it, anyway," she snapped, and turned back to the window.

"Yeah, okay, call it a compulsion. When you see someone doing something dangerous, haven't you ever tried to stop them?"

She sat there for a little while, enduring the swift, probing glances he sent her way, and finally tossed off a curt half-shrug.

"You're a pretty girl," Ez said. "I think of you hopping into cars with people you pick up at truck stops and my whole gut freezes over."

"Yeah." Kasia seemed to thaw just a smidgeon more. "Once in a while, you get a weirdo, but it's not as bad as all that. You learn the rules, you know. No vans. No pickups." She glanced at him with a faint, still-angry smile lurking at the edges of her mouth and then returned to scrutinizing the landscape. "Ride in the backseat by yourself. And most of the time, I do take the bus. I do. But this year, I fell off a ladder in the orange grove and busted my arm. No insurance, obviously, so that ate up my savings, bus money and all. So what was I supposed to do? Stay in California? Those are some scary streets. Go back up to Seattle? Man, it's cold up there!"

"Would you ever stop and just live someplace if the opportunity presented itself?"

"Sure I would! Are you kidding? Who wants to live like this for the rest of their life?" Kasia glanced at him and away again, hunching a little lower in her seat. "I actually lived there in Georgia for a whole year once. I like it there. Winters are warm, and the ocean is so pretty. But I could just never keep a job there. I know a guy in Seattle who's always got a

spot for me on his crew, but the cost of living there is so high and I hate the city. I hate Utah, too," she added, giving him a meaningful look out of the corner of her eye.

"I can understand that. It only got settled because the pioneers thought it was the most inhospitable place on Earth. I wouldn't want to be here myself, but this is kind of where the bones are. Last year, I was up in Wyoming, though. Pretty country. Did some fishing. The year before that, I was in the Gobi Desert, though, and you want to talk inhospitable!"

"Is that in Africa?" she asked, and the final gust of icy awkwardness that had sat between them dissipated.

"Mongolia," he replied, his mood climbing back to its former pleasant high.

Kasia faced out the window for several seconds and finally said, a trifle ruefully, "It must be nice to travel when you don't have to."

"Must be. I'd like to try it someday." Ez grinned, distracted for a moment by memories of various digs around the globe and the adventures involved in trekking to and from them. "You know, there was this one time—I was fresh out of college, my first field assignment, you know—in Kazakhstan when a road crew there unearthed what appeared to be ribs and vertebrae of enormous size. The Kazakhstan scientists thought they'd found a T-Rex, and invited a team of American paleontologists to help them excavate it, so me and my team fly all the way out there and spend three weeks painstakingly—oh drat."



Ez had to stomp on the brakes rather suddenly to avoid hitting the lean, dark figure of a man skulking smack in the middle of the road, and Kasia, who had been listening with expectant pleasure to his story, was thrown against the dashboard with the violence of deceleration. Ez put out his arm automatically to keep her head from hitting anything, and she grabbed on to him with both hands, clutching him like the safety bar of a roller coaster, which was in itself not an entirely unpleasant sensation.

"You okay?" he asked. "Sorry about that. Did you hit your head?"

She started to say something, but whatever it was, it froze in her throat as soon as she lifted her head enough to see out the windshield.

Ez watched her stare for a few seconds, then followed her gaze to the place where the black-garbed man was *still* standing smack in the middle of the road (and now less than three feet from his front fender to boot) and said, mildly enough, "Did I mention we're not going to be alone out here in the desert? I didn't, did I?"

The man was dressed all in black—black shoes, black suit, even a black straw hat—which made him look more than a little like a Bizarro-world Colonel Sanders, and he was not just standing in the road but *posing* in it, legs well apart and shoulders back and both hands resting dramatically on the bronze head of a stout walking stick. His hair was slicked back and streaked with white in two precise lines, one on either side of his head, just above his ears, and he had grown a Snidley Whiplash mustache that fluttered playfully in the little

breeze that had been stirred up by the braking of Ez's truck. Honestly, all he needed was a scarlet-lined opera cape and a limp little lady he could tie to the railroad tracks and he could have been set.

But instead of Miss Pureheart, Snidley of the Utah desert had hooked himself up with a matched set of minions: two enormous young men with bodies that looked like they'd been molded in the Bronze Age to honor the Greek gods and faces that looked like they'd been pounded together by two-year-olds out of playdoh. One was blond and the other brown, but they were otherwise interchangeable as near as Ez could see. The minions towered impressively over the man in black, cracking their knuckles and flexing and curling their lips when they thought about it.

You had to give the man points for dramatic presence, Ez thought. Those were some stirring new additions to the villain's side of the table.

"Who—" Kasia paused and took a quick look around, as if to see if there were any cameras rolling and finding none, continued. "Who in the hell is that?"

"Dr. Damien Brimstone," Ez said cheerfully, unbuckling his seat belt. "Antithesis of all that is decent and good in paleontology, along with two of his henchmen."

His fresh-faced young assistant sat perfectly still for a count of three, absorbing that, and finally exploded, "What?!"

"Stay in the car." Ez hopped out, shut the door behind him, took two steps and then came back, opened the door, and said, "I believe I told you the rule about not swearing. That's one spanking for you." He shut the door again on her

Digging Up Bones  
*by Robin Smith*

expression of distracted discombobulation and went to go see what the good doctor wanted.

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## Chapter Two

The second slam of Professor Esben's door was a perfect punctuation to Kasia's utter lack of coherent thought.

She sat in stupefied silence, watching as Ez strolled around to the front of the truck and faced off against the unbelievably sinister-looking Dr. Brimstone and his thuggish musclemen, unable to take her eyes off the scene or even to close her mouth. She felt like she'd fallen into a comic book and hadn't realized it yet.

Muted by glass and distance, she heard Brimstone say, "Ah, Professor Esben, my arch-nemesis! So we meet again!"

Numbly, hardly aware she was doing it, Kasia whispered, "But this time the advantage is mine."

"But this time—" Brimstone chortled, twirling the tip of his moustache around his pinkie finger, "—the advantage is mine!"

She couldn't deal with this. She would backtrack to Starvation and wait for another ride to come along, someone less good-looking perhaps, but who also wasn't doing time as the arch-nemesis to a paleontologist in a black hat. Hell, if it came to that, she would backtrack all the way to Orange County.

Kasia got out of the truck.

"Damien," Ez said, and pushed his hands through his hair in a gesture of expansive, yet amused, frustration. "Damien, buddy, you know that I love a tired cliché as much as the

next guy, but honestly, we really have got to stop meeting like this."

"My dear colleague," the other man said, throwing back his cape in a grand flourish of triumph. "Much as I may delight in the knowledge that the earthen walls of your star-crossed excavation are plastered in the curses you have leveled against Brimstone, I must remind you it is a plaster of your own mixing! Abandon this endless match of wits between us and concede defeat while you still can, Professor! If you continue to cross me, I promise you these 'meetings' shall continue, for wherever you go in this life, rest assured, I shall be lurking in the shadows!"

Kasia could not help but wonder how many hours this man had spent in front of mirror practicing that little speech, or if he had actually made it up on the spot. No ... no, he had to have practiced it. Nobody said 'shall' these days in improvised conversation.

"Actually," Ez said, distinctly unimpressed, "I was referring more to your habit of lurking for me in the middle of the road at a point when I have almost zero visibility. I'm going to run you down someday, bud."

Brimstone sneered. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Not really. My premiums would go through the roof." Ez leaned back against the hood of the truck, folding his arms and crossing one leg over the other with insolent deliberateness. "But while we're on the subject, to what do I owe the dubious honor of today's lurk?"

"Why, Professor, you *wound* me!" Brimstone fluttered one hand over his heart to demonstrate the great depths of his

personal pain, but didn't bother to disguise the broad grin that still stretched his twisted mouth. "It is only out of my boundless concern for you that I came to await your safe return."

"Is there any reason my return shouldn't have been safe?" Ez asked, and for the first time, Kasia heard a hard note enter his voice and saw a certain stiffness in his spine.

"One never knows," Brimstone demurred, examining the head of his cane. "You might have had, ah, car trouble. The roads here are so uncertain, aren't they, boys?"

Both minions, who had been snarling and flexing so impressively up until now, suddenly froze over into alarm as effectively as if the doctor had handed each of them a complex mathematical proof instead of a rhetorical question. The dark-haired brute on the left, after conferring briefly with his partner, cleared his throat and apologetically rumbled, "Um, no Boss, we didn't do anything to the truck today."

Brimstone's smug smile vanished and the other thug beetled up his sloping brow and added, "Were we supposed to?"

"I guess we could just tip it over now," the first offered, running his gaze over the truck with solicitous speculation, and Kasia promptly started separating herself from association with said truck, just in case.

"Silence!" Brimstone commanded.

"Yeah, that won't be necessary, but thanks anyway." Ez straightened and pushed himself aggressively into Brimstone's aura of personal space and said, "But if I ever

need a hand putting my truck back on its tires, I'll know where to find you, won't I?"

"I have no idea what you mean," Brimstone sniffed.

"He means in case you tell us to flip the truck over," the blond thug explained.

"Silence!"

"That's exactly what I mean. But of course, I'm sure I'm not going to have any more trouble from you and your ... I'm sorry," Ez said, politely turning to include the two looming henchmen. "I forget. Which one of you is Rocky and which is Bullwinkle?"

The darker of the two raised his hand at once. "I'm Rocky," he said helpfully. "But his name ain't Bull."

"I'm Hugo," said the other, somewhat ponderously.

"Yeah, he's Hugo. You musta gotten him mixed up with someone else."

"I got one of those faces," Hugo agreed, complacent as a cow and seemingly oblivious to the crude clay-like charm of said face.

"Terribly sorry, I'll remember that," Ez said.

"Naw, it's okay. The Boss gets my name wrong all the time."

The pleasantries had obviously gone on too long for Brimstone's liking and he suddenly exploded into full menacing voice. "Silence! Silence, you hebetudinous troglodyte!"

Unruffled, Hugo merely hooked a demonstrative thumb over at the black-garbed paleontologist. "See?"

"It's a very simple rule, you simpering simpleton!" Dr. Brimstone hissed. "When I am talking, you are shutting up! That's what silence means!"

As the minions mumbled sorries and shuffled back into looming position, Dr. Brimstone suddenly caught sight of Kasia.

For an instant, the villainous paleontologist seemed utterly derailed by Kasia's presence, but he recovered nicely, swiftly exchanging his sinister crouch for his sinister gentleman's stance and twirling the left tip of his moustache as he sized her up. "Well now, Professor, what have we here? A beautiful desert flower in the midst of this barren wasteland."

Kasia, who had been inching quietly down the length of the truck toward the road, had to physically stop to try and assimilate that. Even in the movies, that line would have been corny, but out here in the real world, it literally boggled her mind, and Kasia, for all the uncertainties and adventures of her young life, had never been boggled before. What made it even worse was that Brimstone seemed genuinely not to know just how preposterous he looked and sounded, and instead of making him more laughable, that fact actually gave him a wacky kind of credibility. Anyone who could demonstrate that level of immunity to their own ridiculousness just had to be dangerous.

Brimstone apparently took her prolonged silence in a favorable light because he began to advance on her. He moved in a Vaudeville saunter, actually twirling his cane a little with every step before planting it in perfect step with his right heel. "How deliciously unexpected," he purred as he



reached a stop in front of her. "Dr. Damien Brimstone, my dear, very much at your service!" And he suddenly swept off his hat and bowed to take her hand and kiss it. "I am, of course, delighted to make the acquaintance of such a beautiful lady."

His oily little whiskers bumbled over the back of her hand with every word, and if she'd had a little more of her wits about her, Kasia might have tried to yank her hand back and wipe it off. As it was, utterly flummoxed, Kasia could only seek out the relative normalcy of Professor Esben, and finding him, demand, "Is this guy for real?!"

"He certainly thinks he is," Ez replied, looking deeply amused.

Brimstone straightened, re-capped himself, and adjusted the lie of his cloak in the same flourish. He, too, addressed Esben. "And does this enchanting creature of yours have a name?"

"Miss Payne," Ez said, and came over to stand beside her, quite casually, but with unmistakable possessiveness. "She's going to be my new assistant."

"How exciting for you both." Brimstone permitted himself a sinister smirk. "How exciting for us all. Although I dare say you could have done better, my dear, than to ally yourself to the unfortunate Professor Esben. He's had, ah, a most remarkable run of bad luck this season." He followed that up with a gust of evil laughter, and if a stenographer had been there to record the sound for posterity, it could have been accurately typed up as 'Bwa-ha-ha-ha-HA!' without any awkwardness at all.

Kasia found herself blinking uncontrollably, as though her subconscious self had decided it could change the scene by resetting the shutter. Again, she found herself staring at Ez, trying to anchor herself to the one person who wasn't acting like he was trying to channel the ghost of a bad pulp comic.

"In fact," Brimstone continued, playfully twirling the tip of his moustache. "I would dare to suggest that you consider my employment as a safer alternative."

She couldn't take it anymore.

"If I join you," Kasia said incredulously, "will I rule the fossil flats as your Queen, for God's sake?! Will you buy me a black pillbox hat and a tommygun and teach me how to say, 'You've stood athwart of my plans for the last time, Rex Rocketman!' with a straight face? Good Christ, man, what's wrong with you?"

Professor Esben had both hands slapped over his face by the fifth word and was actually bent at the waist, howling with laughter by the time she'd finished, but Brimstone had grown slowly flushed and thunderously unamused.

"Very well, Miss Payne," he said at last. "You've made your choice. I only hope you live to enjoy the fruits of your misguided labors, for I fear you shall reap only a bitter marmalade. Good day!"

"B'bye now," Ez called, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes and waving. "So long, boys! Come on over tonight at six and we'll have cookies and play cards!"

"I said, 'good day!'" Brimstone snapped as both minions brightened. He seized one over-sized bicep in each hand and

threw them both in the direction of the road. "That means we go now!"

"Yeah, that means we go now, too." Ez patted Kasia's shoulder, still grinning, and started around to get back into the truck.

There was a moment there when Kasia considered just walking away—she'd been on her own for six years and had a very low weirdness threshold—but now that Brimstone was no longer in sight, it was easy to forget about him and just think about eighteen hundred dollars after six weeks of playing in the dirt. And the Professor still seemed all right, just a little strange.

In the end, although the words 'bitter marmalade' were still ringing in her ears, she let herself be swayed by dollar signs and climbed back into the cab of the truck. Ez didn't seem too surprised by her hesitation, but although he gave her a certain knowing smile, he didn't comment on it either.

"So," Kasia said after several minutes of silent driving. "When he said 'bad luck'...?"

Ez snorted and shook his head. "Yeah, I don't know. Much as Brimstone would like to believe he's foiling my every move out here, he really hasn't caused any problems I couldn't solve with a ten-dollar bill and a hardware store. Still, he *has* been a nuisance."

"What is he doing out here?" Kasia asked. "I mean, besides staging his own personal Snidley Whiplash revue."

"Yeah, isn't that a hoot? For the first few days, you have to fight to keep a straight face and after that, you have to fight to avoid chiming in just like him. That kind of talk just creeps

in on you. It's like sand." Ez shook his head again, and then lowered his voice to a confidential level. "And just between you and me, I love having an arch-nemesis. I've wanted one since I was three."

"Well sure, what boy wouldn't? They're keen."

Ez turned off the dirt road and grappled the gearshift into four-wheel mode to bounce them up the side of an incline to another set of flats. "I know you're mocking me, but yes, they are. And to answer your first question, he's here for the same reason I am, only I'm here on behalf of Brigham Young University and he's representing Utah State University, the BYU's mortal enemy."

"Oh come on!"

"Hey, I told you it was contagious! But seriously, Brimstone and I are up for a lot of the same grants from year to year and we end up playing Fossil-Paper-Scissors for rights to a lot of the same dig sites. This year was no different, except that I won more of the advantages, so now he feels like he's got more to stand athwart of." The terrain evened out and Ez guided the truck back onto a set of ruts disguising itself as a road. In the not-too-far-distance, the dark lines and flashes of man-made objects were becoming visible. "For example," Ez continued, steering towards the structures. "Our dear Dr. Brimstone is currently operating under the delusion that he got my previous assistant deported, when in fact, he had to go home and watch his wife have a baby."

"Deported?"

"Yes. Apparently, after countless hours of tireless research, the good doctor stumbled upon the notion that a guy named

Lazar Zdislav Krejczik just *might* not be a native Utahan. He promptly turned his suspicions over to the proper authorities, who are not in the habit of replying to crackpots, but who are perfectly content to send casual correspondence to said immigrants warning them that a crackpot is in the area."

"How did he take it?"

"Laze? Oh, he thought it was a laugh. He wanted to take a picture of himself in front of a barbed wire fence holding a crust of bread and salting it with his tears to send to Brimstone in a Christmas card, but he never got the chance. We went into town last week to try and find a Polaroid camera for him and when he called home to check on Mary, his sister-in-law told him the baby was arriving slightly ahead of schedule, so he gave me a hearty handshake and hopped on the nearest bus out of here. *Do pobachennya*, Lazar. *Prybit*, Daddy."

"So Brimstone thinks he got the guy kicked out of the country?" Kasia was having a little trouble finding the humor in this. "And ... he came all the way out to the middle of nowhere just to stand in the road so he could gloat on you when you came back from town?"

Ez chuckled fondly. "He's been doing that every time I've left the camp this last week. Just standing out there for hours and hours ... posing ... sneering ... I sure hope Lazar sends him that picture. Here we are."

The truck ground to a slow halt alongside a weathered-looking horse trailer, and Ez cut the engine and looked at Kasia expectantly. "Say hello to your new home. At least for the next six weeks."

She wasn't sure what she should be feeling. It didn't look like much, but then, neither did an 18-hole golf course until you had to mow the lawn. Slowly, Kasia climbed out of the cab and went to have a look around.

The first thing she noticed was that 'camp' was kept well separate from 'dig'. The horse trailer, the single tent, the folding chair and card table that made up all the visible furniture—all these things were tucked in close quarters at one side of the site, while the tarp-covered pockets denoting excavations were spread out over the rest of it. The perimeter was easily made out; there was a filmy ring over the sand and rock, roughly but completely enclosing the site, residue of that 'funny snake spray' the Professor had mentioned earlier. In the exact center of the site was a huge gas-powered generator, silent now, with two long tool boxes stacked atop it. There was no other evidence of work or residence, no campfire, no crates, no loose collection of dinosaur bones.... just this.

All in all, it was hard to imagine a more desolate or depressing place to have to work.

"Well?" Ez prompted, appearing as by magic at her elbow.

She crafted half a smile for his benefit. "Home sweet home."

He clapped her on the shoulder and squeezed briefly before moving off. "It's not that bad, I promise, and your responsibilities are comparatively light. Now come on over here and meet the trailer."

"Hi, trailer," Kasia said wanly.

"There now, see? Things look better already!" Ez unexpectedly caught Kasia's hand, turned it palm up and slapped a small set of keys in it. "These are yours," he said. "You'll note they're labeled. TR is for 'trailer', TK is for 'truck' and the TBs all stand for the various tool boxes. They're labeled, too. Everything in camp is kept locked at all times, and everything that can't lock should be kept inside something that can. We do this to discourage scorpions ... of the eight- and two-legged variety."

"Have you had trouble with Brimstone stealing stuff?" Kasia asked as Ez turned to fiddle the trailer open.

"Not so much this year, but last year, he was all over the place, nickel and diming me to death by walking off with trowels and brushes. I shouldn't have left the toolboxes out today, incidentally, but I knew I could get away with it because of how committed he's been lately to catching me out on the road when I come back from town. Now that you're here, I expect he'll quit that and get back to some serious plotting, and for a man so fanatical on the subject of evildoing, he's got remarkably little in the way of imagination, so keep everything but the gennie in the trailer and keep the trailer locked."

He finally got the lock sprung and the doors swung out and locked in an open position. He dropped the ramp, climbed up and hit a Snake-Lite mounted on the wall to throw the interior sharply into yellowish streams of light. Homebuilt shelves enclosed by crisscrossed bungee cords took up the entire left-hand wall, and on the right, two gun racks had been modified to hold the larger tools and shovels. Most of the rear of the

trailer was occupied by long, open-topped wooden crates that had been secured to the walls with canvas straps. Each crate was designed to fit neatly on top of each other, and through the grooves designed to accommodate the tie-downs, Kasia could see that only the bottommost of the four crates had anything in it and it appeared to be filled with enormous chunks of chalk. The only things in the whole trailer that were not strapped down or secured in some fashion were several large bags of plaster mix, and they were so heavily mashed into one another that Kasia doubted they'd slide around, even over this rough terrain.

"Now I have a system here," Ez said, running his eyes restlessly over his miniature kingdom. "But it shouldn't be too hard to figure out. Everything's labeled."

"Do you iron your underwear or just put 'em up on coat hangers?"

Ez blinked rapidly and gave her a startled look. "What?"

"I said, 'What's with the tie-down over there by that bucket of bolt shavers?'" she said innocently.

The Professor smiled, but his eyes narrowed. "Actually, I heard you perfectly well the first time, but you get an A for effort and quick-thinking. That'll serve you well as you go through life. Now, if you don't mind, we'll get back to the orientation, shall we? Look at the nice labels, Miss Payne."

She looked, mostly to disguise the fact that she was rolling her eyes, and obediently memorized the writing on the nearest strips of duct tape. "I'm sure I'll catch on."



"Well, I do most of the loading and unloading, to be honest, but you should familiarize yourself with everything just in case. I'm a big believer in being prepared."

"I can honestly say I've never met a bigger boy scout."

"Yeah, you laugh now, but I'll have you know there's a lot of ladies out there who think a shoebox full of merit badges is sexy. Bottom shelf," Ez said, tapping it with his foot. "Is camping gear. You will see a roll of ugly brown carpet, a cute little orange tent, a box of air mattress, a sleeping bag, and two pillows. Those are yours. Put the carpet down first. Carpet is our friend. Carpet not only cushions those little rocks and ruts and things that dig into a body's spine, but they permit you to crush any scorpions you might roll over on without letting them sting you in return. Once your tent is up, you can keep it up for the duration of your stay, but keep the flap zipped every second that you are not bodily entering or exiting."

"This is to keep scorpions from subletting my pillowcase. I get it already. We went over this in the truck, remember?"

"I remember, but it's worth repeating." Ez glanced at her archly. "When it gets dark, I will stand you up on the top of this trailer and give you a crisp dollar bill for every electric light you can count. I guarantee I won't be out more than five bucks. Scorpions haven't been much of a problem so far, but that's mainly because we don't let them be a problem. Remember, there's no such thing as 'just a scorpion sting' when you are fifty miles from the nearest hospital."

"Got it," Kasia said, trying to project an aura of humility in the face of awesome wisdom and privately thinking of all the

times she'd been fifty miles from nowhere when the shit had hit her fan. But hey, if the Professor wanted to lay on a bit thick, she could be generous and let him; after all, you couldn't be too careful in the desert.

"All right then. To your left, second shelf, you will see some blue gas cans. The blue ones have the snake oil in it. Use a sprayer—" Ez picked something mechanical with a hose sticking out of one end off the top shelf and wagged it before dropping it again. "—to spray around the perimeter every night before you go to bed. It doesn't take much, so don't get crazy with it, but do take care not to leave any gaps."

"Check."

"Right there beside your left sneaker, you will note there is not a red gas can, but there ought to be. It's in the truck at the moment. The red ones have gasoline in them. Every morning, it is your job to top off the generator so it will shed light when we need it, mix plaster instead of making us do it by hand, inflate your air mattress in two minutes instead of by mouth in six hours, etcetera, etcetera. We don't use the gennie very often, but when we do, it's nice to have it work right away. When the gas can starts to feel a little empty, it goes in the truck and we go to town to get more.

"Trips to town," Ez continued, shooing her out ahead of him and proceeding to lock up the trailer once more, "happen once or twice a week, whenever we happen to run out of food or pop or what-have-you. When we go to town, I will spring for hot showers, a lunch at Pop's Place, and two bags of cold ice for the cooler. It is important to note that none of these things are reasons in and of themselves to go to town. Also

note that the only town we are associating ourselves with is Starvation, and everything they've got, you already saw. I am not driving all the way to Vernal just to get a Big Mac. Okay, where are we? Oh, right! Gas in the morning, snake oil at night. And in between, we have the digs. Come on over."

There were four digs, but only three of them were covered with tarps. Two of these were simply huge—asymmetrical quilts made up of squares of blue and brown and grey, like a child's game of Tetris lying unfinished on the desert floor—but the third was capped by just a single sheet of heavy plastic, and it sat well off to one side of the others, looking lonely and somehow cognizant of its relative unimportance. The tarps were all staked tightly through their grommets as close to the ground as possible, but the wind had snuck in regardless and set their edges all to snapping, so that the camp was filled with the sound of giant, restless bats. Stakes were set up to mark the entry points around the digs, and every time the wind shifted, the tarp would lift just enough to show Kasia the first step of a set of rough-hewn stairs; necessary, she supposed, as the uncovered dig site looked to be at least eight feet deep.

Ez had walked over to the largest collection of tarps, and now he stood by the stakes that marked its entrance point, looking down on it as though he could see through the heavy plastic cover to the mysteries below. "Meet Rex," he said. "T. Rex, naturally. And over there, we have Sara Topps—" He pointed toward the other large dig, and then beyond it to the open hole. "—and Terry Don, who's all done now. We name

'em for simplicity's sake, incidentally, not on account of anything we find in there."

Ez squinted up at the sun and then turned away from the tarps with a serious look. "All of this had probably better wait until tomorrow. When it gets dark around here, it does it in a hurry and you still need to set up your tent."

"What about the little one?" Kasia asked, looking over her shoulder at the small dig covered by its single tarp. "Doesn't it get a name?"

"Oh that?" Ez shrugged. "That's Bob. Bob-a-saur. There's nothing in there but some fragments and splinters. You can play around in there if you want, but it's getting late, so right now—"

"Right, I heard you. Set up the tent."

"Good guess, but wrong. Right now, we've got to get your spanking done so we still have daylight in which to set up your tent. Come on over."

Kasia had taken half a step forward purely on auto-pilot before the meaning of those words, of one word in particular, sank all the way in. She stopped cold, ran the last few remarks back through her brain, decided she hadn't heard him right, and said, "Could you repeat that, please?"

"You break the rules and you get a spanking," Ez said, quite calmly. "I told you that on the way up.

"You were serious?!" She started backing up.

"One of those rules was the prohibition of swearing," Ez continued implacably. "You agreed to my conditions, you even repeated it back to me so I'd know you knew what you were agreeing to. And then you cussed at me twice. Now the first

time ... I can overlook that one because you were a little upset—"

"Buster, you have no idea what upset is!" she snarled.

"Drop that attitude." He didn't raise his voice, he only stopped smiling, and that was enough to let the air out of Kasia's outrage. "This is not an argument. This is how it's going to be."

He wasn't menacing her. He wasn't really threatening her. Kasia was at an utter loss to know how to deal with him. She couldn't keep backing up, because he wasn't pursuing her. She couldn't shout at him, because he wasn't shouting back. He was just standing there, acting like he was being perfectly logical, and forcing Kasia to try and battle him with reason.

"You can't spank me," she said finally. "I'm a grown woman."

"Yes, you are and yes, I can. And you can quit that," Ez added as Kasia took another reflexive step backward. "I'm not going to chase you down. I'm going to stand right here and you are going to bend over this generator and accept just and reasonable chastisement in accordance with the nature of your infraction so we can move on to the matter of your tent while we still have daylight."

"And what if I say no?"

"Why, then I unleash my army of flying monkeys to wrestle you to the ground while I get out the brachiosaurus thigh bone I intend to use to punish you." Ez rolled his eyes. "So say no. There's the highway."

Kasia didn't move. Neither did Ez.

"Feel free to help yourself to a coke from the cooler while you wait for it to get cool enough to start walking back to town," he said finally.

"You can't do this!" she exploded.

"Sure I can."

"It's sexual harassment!"

"There's nothing remotely sexual about it. I'm not even going to make you take your shorts down." Ez crossed his arms and cocked a brow at her confidently. "And you might want to know that even in these enlightened times, here in the Desert State, sparing the rod is viewed with a certain amount of disdain."

"Then it's blackmail! It's ... It's something, dammit! You can't make me get spanked just to work for you!"

"At the risk of repeating myself, sure I can. You agreed to obey the rules. I told you what would happen if you stepped out of line, and I told you that you could only get paid if you lasted out the whole term. You walk off in the middle and you forfeit your wages."

"Did you spank your students when they swore?" Kasia demanded.

"Of course not. Those were students, but you, Miss Payne, are my assistant and there are whole worlds of difference." Ez suddenly unfolded his arms and held out one hand, saying, "Look, I'm not going to stand here all day and argue just for argument's sake. Come here and take your spanking or go get your stuff and I'll drive you back to Starvation and drop you off at Pop's. One way or the other, but this is how it's going to be and that's all there is."

"Then forget it." Kasia turned her back on him and stalked toward the truck to get her pack, but before she'd more than a few steps, she had slowed to a stop again. Scowling at the tops of her sneakers, Kasia tried to be objective.

So he wanted to spank her. What was the big deal, really? She'd been spanked before. Admittedly, not since she was six, but still. She'd get to leave her shorts on, he'd said so, and he was right, it wasn't like he hadn't given her fair warning. And let's not forget that eighteen hundred bucks waiting for her at the finish line and wrapped up with a bus ticket to that warm, friendly Georgia ocean.

Or she could keep her pride and her principles, and hitch her way across the Midwest, trying to keep one step ahead of Old Man Winter and an arm's length away from all the whackos and perverts on the road.

All she had to do was take a little slap on the fanny and then watch her mouth for a few weeks.

Disenheartened, Kasia looked back over her shoulder and said, "There's no way we could solve this by running laps?"

"In this heat?"

"I guess not." Kasia trudged back to the place where Professor Esben patiently waited and gave him a last fierce glare before bending over the generator. "I just want it on record that I'm doing this under protest and you're a real jerk."

"So noted." Ez kicked her legs a little further apart and applied a little pressure between her shoulder blades, forcing her from a locked-arm stance to one that had her embracing the generator like a girl on the cover of 'Romantic Hardware

Confessions'. He took up position at her side, gripping her securely around the waist and touching his hand briefly to the out-thrust target of her buttocks. "You just want to remember that you brought this on yourself."

She opened her mouth to protest the unfairness of that remark, but she never had the chance. The sound of Professor Esben's palm connecting with her bottom was loud, but it was nothing compared to the deafening roar that ripped out of her own throat. The pain was shocking—not merely startling or even surprising, but icewater-on-a-sleeping-sunbather shocking—and the Professor didn't give her time to absorb it. He drummed several good whacks into her, one after the other and right on top of each other, until her right ass-cheek felt roughly twice its size and hard as brick.

Then, without warning, Ez's hand came cracking down on her left cheek, and Kasia, who had actually begun to weather the onslaught pretty well, bellowed anew. But before she'd even had time to adjust herself to the new direction of impact, Kasia became aware of an awful swarming-hornet sting crawling all over her tenderized right nate.

Kasia completely lost control. She tried to push herself off the generator, but Ez's arm was steel around her waist and his elbow in her back kept her at a fixed angle. She tried to dive forward and to one side, but succeeded only in wedging herself more tightly against the generator when Ez only rolled with her. She kicked out mulishly and Ez immediately left off paddling her bottom and delivered three hard, fast whacks to the thigh of the offending limb, and Kasia's body shot back to attention before her mouth had even finished screaming.



Now both cheeks were blazing and Ez returned to spanking them, first one side and then the other, in a crisp one-two that never quite eclipsed the stinging of either. And Kasia, in an agony of helplessness, couldn't do anything but let him.

"All right," Ez said, and laid one last wallop at full strength dead center of her bucking bottom before releasing her. "All done, but I want you to understand that this was your first time and I went really easy on you. Next time I hear a blue word come out of your mouth, I'm going to see to it that you're sleeping on your stomach for a solid week."

"You—!" Kasia gulped air convulsively, swiping at her face and staring in horror at the tears she found on her fingertips. "You—! You—!"

But it was too hard to form a decent insult when she had to screen herself for profanity, which the pain scorching through her backside made it impossible not to do. She was aware that she sounded like an idiot—"You.... "Think. "Big.... "Think. "Bullying.... "Think.—but she was unwilling to abandon restraint and give him both verbal barrels. In the end, she had to settle for the unhappily benign, "That really hurt!"

Unperturbed, Ez merely hooked his thumbs through his belt loops and said, "That would be the point, yeah."

Unable to find words fierce and yet clean enough to properly express herself, Kasia grabbed a handful of sand and pebbles and threw it at him, coating his face and chest very effectively with bright orange dust.

Ez closed his eyes for a while, then slowly turned to one side and spat to clear his mouth. "New rule," he said calmly. "No throwing dirt."

"Jerk," Kasia muttered, but she felt better. Even her butt seemed to hurt a little less, although not so much that she could stop rubbing at it.

Ez spat again, carefully wiped at his eyes, and said, "Well, Miss Payne, this looks like the beginning of a beautiful partnership. Let's go set up your tent."

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### Chapter Three

It was ten o'clock in the morning on her first full day of paleontological assisting and Kasia had already been over the generator again for swearing. Funny, she'd always thought of herself as relatively mild in that regard, but it was amazing how many times she found herself right on the cusp of a blue streak without really being aware of it. And then this morning, fresh out of bed and still rubbing at the faint flares of yesterday's spanking whenever she had to bend over or backed into something, she had dropped the coffeepot (not even full of coffee yet, just water!) and heard a hissy "Shit!" pop right out of her. Slap, went her hand over her horrified mouth, but it was no use. Zip, went Professor Esben's tent and his croaky-morning voice said, "Up against the generator, Miss Payne. Let me just get some pants on."

What a crummy way to start the morning.

She had to eat breakfast standing, snuffling into her stale cinnamon roll and loudly thinking bitter thoughts that included all of the swears she'd ever heard.

"What I want to know," she announced suddenly, "is whether you ever spanked that other guy, Lazar, when *he* broke the rules."

Ez glanced up from his frowning contemplation of his breakfast, looking sleepily surprised and then thoughtful. "Well, no," he admitted.

"See! It *is* sexual harassment!"

"The subject never came up," Ez continued, ignoring her second outburst as he dropped his muzzy gaze back to his plate. "Laze never broke the rules and he never swore. Not in English, anyway. I'm reasonably certain not everything he said was really Ukrainian for 'Man, that's a heavy fossil.'"

"What? So, as long as you don't understand it, I can swear?" she pressed, still cupping her butt as she peered down at him in suspicion.

Ez spread his arms expansively, sloshing some coffee off into the sand and nearly losing a cinnamon roll in the process. "Hey, pick a language and run with it, honey. I know the more common French and Spanish ones, but the rest of the field's wi-i-ide open!"

So there was a loophole after all. Too bad she'd dropped out of High School before she'd had the chance to take a foreign language course.

"May I assume from your expression that you're regretting never having befriended a salty Masai warrior or Vietnamese sea merchant?" Ez asked, eyeing her over his cup with a sly smile.

And God help her, but even now, with one hand still kneading at the sting of this morning's spanking and yesterday's bruises, the words 'go to hell, wiseass' were right there, knocking at the backs of her teeth. Kasia opened her mouth, bit down, and stood there, fuming, while Ez watched her with mock sympathy.

"Awww, I'll tell you what. I'll give you a Get Out of Spanking Free card. One use only. That way, when you really need a colorful metaphor, you can have one. Just one,

though, for six weeks, so plan carefully." The Professor drained his cup, popped the last bite of bacon into his mouth, and stood up, slapping imaginary dust off his knees. "Ready to start working?"

"I guess."

"Great! I'll fire up the generator. You clean up here and bring us out a box of work-lights. It's labeled."

His enthusiasm undampened by her dour demeanor, the Professor strolled off and left her with the breakfast dishes. Kasia couldn't even be sure how good his ears were, and was forced to do the washing up in silence, although she had several pointed thoughts on the subject of 'women's work' that she would have loved to share with him.

The dishes—scoured by sand, washed with a drop of soap, and rinsed with a few handfuls of precious water—went back into the trailer, under the duct tape label for EATS, and Kasia emerged again with two battery-powered snake lights. Ez was already kneeling over at Rex, picking at the rope that laced up the tarp-flaps, but he managed to triumph over the granny knot just as Kasia came up behind him. He reached back for a snake light, switched it on and wrapped it around his neck like a stole, then grinned at her and said, "Ready to manhandle your first dead dinosaur?"

"Born ready," she deadpanned.

"Then let's go," he said, and descended.

She followed him down, easing into a shaded place that was somehow hotter and stuffier than the open flats above. It smelled, too; not just the sharp, mineral smell of clay, but of sweaty, unshowered student bodies. The floor wasn't very

even and Kasia moved slowly so that she could be sure of her footing even as she studied her alien surroundings; throughout the dig, the rough-hewn 'walls' and 'floor' were dotted with powder-white bowls and grooves where fossils had presumably been removed, but everything was clean, almost as if Ez had ordered the place scrubbed and swept when his students left.

"We have fans in the trailer," Ez called as he continued to wind his way through the flowing walls and hollows of the dig site. "I'll get them out here in a sec. I just want to show you what you're going to be doing first." He aimed his light around the dig, guiding Kasia's eyes to more of those blanched depressions. "And like I said, most of it is already done. We're just here to mop up, so to speak."

"How long did it take to build this?" Kasia asked. Stretching up on her tiptoes, she could just brush her fingers along the bottom of the gently-flapping tarp.

"There were twenty-two students this year," Ez replied. "And they signed on for four weeks of field work. Not too shabby, is it?"

"Not too shabby at all," she agreed.

"Okay, Miss Payne, eyes front. This is a fossil."

Kasia turned and aimed her eyes obediently at the place the Professor was shining his light. It didn't look like much, just a brownish-grey lump protruding from the hardpan, its edges clearly outlined by someone's efforts to scrape the earth surrounding it away. It wasn't all that big, maybe the length of her hand, and it wasn't any kind of bone-shape that Kasia could immediately recognize.

"I'm going to be optimistic and say that most of the actual excavating is done, although we're bound to run into a few more bones when we take the visible ones here out, but we'll just have to cross that tar pit when we come to it. This is where I'm going to really need your help," Ez said, patting the exposed fossil. "We're going to need to finish taking all the bones we did find out of the ground, wrap them in plaster jackets, and load them onto the trailer, and by 'we', I mostly mean 'you', because my job is going to be marking and cataloguing everything you find so I can recreate the dig layout when I get back to the University."

"So what are we digging up here?" Kasia asked, running her finger along the protruding fossil. "What kind of dinosaur, I mean?"

"Utahraptors, mostly, but we've also got some Iguanodon and Maiasaur jumbled up in with 'em. See, millions of years ago, a flash flood swept through this river we're standing in and flash-drowned a bunch of dinosaurs, floated them on down to this particular point, which nature had shaped like the U-bend of a sink, and just like a drain-trap today, all the dead'uns piled up here. The waters receded, the bank of the river fell in and covered over all the corpses, and thus made it possible for us to dig them up today. Huzzah."

"I've never heard of a Utahraptor," Kasia remarked.

"Did you see Jurassic Park?"

"Of course. I was alive in the nineties."

"Well, those giant, scary guys that tried to eat those kids in the kitchen are essentially Utahraptors, only Spielberg didn't know they existed, so he just took some Velociraptors

and made them twice their normal size. About a year later, paleontologists Kirkland, Gaston, and Burge found the first fossils of the Utahraptor, proving that truth can not only be stranger than fiction, it can also be jealous of it." Ez ran a hand lovingly along the ugly length of rough bone and smiled. "I really love those movies. I carry them around with me everywhere I go, just on the off chance that I'll bump into a DVD player. Oh well. Anyway, the sheer volume of Utahraptor bones here may be profoundly significant because it would mean either that raptors hunted in far greater packs that previously theorized, or that they came together for other reasons, such as seasonal mating displays or nesting."

"Yeah, but you can't tell any of that stuff just by looking at a bunch of bones from a mass drowning, can you?"

"You never know what you're looking at until you know what you're looking for," Ez said cryptically. "Okay, I've had about all of this air I can stand. Let's fire up the genny, get some fans set up and bring the mixer down here. You," he added, so sternly that Kasia backed up, thinking she might be in trouble. "You have no idea how lucky you are that we live in an age of ultra-lightweight plaster. Come on, chop-chop, daylight's burning and these bones ain't getting any deader."

"Yeah, yeah." Kasia fell into step behind him and looked around again, this time with an eye toward work, and saw, not a room full of dinosaurs, but a good nine hours' worth of labor on her knees in a hot, sweaty cave. Still, if there was one thing she was good at, it was pulling shit-detail without complaining. And if the Professor was even half as good at



working as he was at talking, this would be the easiest eighteen-hundred dollar paycheck she'd ever earned.

\* \* \* \*

Ez got the generator going while his girl brought out the fans and started the picky process of untangling the miles of extension cords so that the 'airing-out' phase of the excavation site could begin. He missed Lazar already. There was nothing like having a giant, hair-covered Ukrainian around to liven up the place when you were carting ten or twenty bags of plaster and a commercial-grade mixer down a flight of hand-carved stairs. His Miss Payne, on the other hand ... wow, when she punched a metaphorical time-card, she did it loud enough for the whole camp to hear. Nothing but monosyllabic grunts and the occasional hairy eyeball, regardless of how high he turned up the charm.

The next six weeks were starting to stretch out like one of those trick camera shots in a scary movie; you know, that shot when the intrepid heroine in the tight sweater suddenly realizes there is a phenomenally bad actor in an unconvincing rubber mask calling her from inside the house on the basement extension and any minute now it was going to leap through the door and cut her into confetti with a hatchet. Frankly, Ez would almost prefer a confetti-cutting than to be bored to death by being forced to share close quarters with a sourpuss. There had to be a way to lighten her up.

"What goes down first?" Kasia called from the trailer. "The plaster or the mixer?"

"Mixer," he called back, and jogged over to join her. "And it has to be by hand, unfortunately. We used to have one of those pushie-wheelie trolley things, but it got left out one night and Brimstone snuck in and stole the cotterpins, so now it's no good."

Kasia turned around slowly, pinning him with her patent-worthy 'you are the dimmest bulb I've ever met' expression, and said, "You could get new cotterpins, you know," in the same tone she might use to remind him that socks go on the *in*-side of shoes.

Ez smiled at her, comforting himself with the knowledge that his smile was probably every bit as irritating to her as her 'dim bulb' look was to him. "Nope, he bought them all. I've got a few on back-order down at Pop's, but the service around here being what is, they'll probably come in about two days before we have to pack up and leave. It's really one of the only really irritating things he's managed to do this time," Ez reflected, and then shrugged. "But at least I have the consolation of knowing he spent about two hundred dollars on, like, a thousand cotterpins that he will spend the rest of his life trying to get rid of. Every time I have to lug that mixer out, I just think of him gluing little googly eyes on it and trying to pass it off as a handmade knick-knack at some roadside stand somewhere. It helps."

Kasia was now staring at him with the narrow-eyed fascination of an entomologist examining some new species of beetle. Slowly, she said, "Have you ever thought of just going over there and taking two of his cotterpins?"

"That would be stealing, Miss Payne," he replied, just as slowly. "And stealing is wrong."

She rolled her eyes so fiercely he would not have been surprised if they'd popped out and kept rolling across the floor of the trailer. "Oh what-ever!" she snapped. "Let's just get this thing unloaded and start working. Stealing is wrong," she added in a stage-mutter. "Sheesh."

Oh yeah. Six weeks of this. Bring it on.

Ez showed the girl the best gripping-places on the mixer and moved around to the opposite side, thinking happy kitten thoughts until his smile was a trifle less forced. And to be fair to her, Ez knew he couldn't expect the girl to drop all her street-built defenses by the second day, but emotional barricades he could deal with; on the other hand, this irritating habit Kasia had of coming over all cool and professional the second she considered herself 'on the clock' was going to drive him absolutely out of his tree before the week was out.

"All right," Kasia said, with precisely the right degree of crisp diligence to efficiently dampen a man's desire for chit-chat. "Let's move this beast. On three?"

"One-two-three!" he chanted obediently, and between them, they brought the mixer up off the floor. Ez circled around, gallantly taking the backwards point, and they inched their way carefully down the trailer's ramp and into the morning sunshine. The golden light and rust-colored mountains lifted Ez's mood the rest of the way back to genuine cheerfulness, and he made a new, if silent, vow to be aggressively charming until his new assistant came around to

a more optimistic way of thinking. And what could be more non-threatening and appealing than a good anecdote?

"So it's my first dig," Ez began, picking up the threads of yesterday's conversation without any effort at all. "And I fly all the way out to Kazakhstan in the company of some of the most pre-eminent names in paleontology—"

"What the heck are you...? Oh yeah, the funny bones." The girl struggled briefly with her grip on the mixer and nodded to him when she was ready to continue.

"Not just funny bones," Ez insisted. "Clowns have funny bones. These were the ribs and vertebrae of some kind of dinosaur of prodigious size, that could easily belong to the first T-Rex ever found in that part of the world. That's an important distinction."

"Got it, got it." Kasia shuffled forward a few inches and stopped to rearrange her handhold again. "Kazakhstan. T-Rex. Go on."

"We fly all the way out there," Ez began again, doggedly taking out the slack in his story and being terribly good about all these interruptions. "Handshakes all around with the native scientists and then we step on over to the excavation where I come face to rib-cage with these *huge* black bones jutting out of the ground and they look to be in fantastic condition. Excitement doesn't begin to cover it."

"I bet." But she was smiling at him—a crooked, good-natured sort of smile that let a fella know his efforts at charm are neither unwelcome nor wasted—and Ez grinned back, warming to his theme.

"Well, as I've mentioned, this was my first field assignment where I held any kind of degree of authority and I was taking no chances. We spent the next three weeks coaxing those ribs out of the ground with paintbrushes and toothbrushes and ostrich-hair feathers, and plastering them up with—"

"Speaking of plaster," Kasia said, losing her smile as she stopped yet again to jockey for a better grip. "This would go a whole lot faster if you'd get up under the ass-end of this thing a little more. That's where its center of gravity—"

"You know, we were doing so well," Ez sighed, and stopped walking. "Put it down."

She blinked at him, by all appearances honestly bewildered. "What? Why?"

"Watch your fingers and put it down," he ordered, and when she'd obeyed and stood back, flexing her fingers and looking baffled, Ez folded his arms and said, "Do you want to use that Get Out of Spanking Free card?"

"For what?" Kasia's eyes flashed wide with sudden understanding and then narrowed again almost immediately with outrage. "What, ass? I can't say ass? Ass isn't a swear!"

"Oh yes it is."

"You can hit it, but I can't say it?! That's not fair!"

"I can touch lots of body parts that I can't talk about in polite society," he parried. "Do you want to use the card or not?"

Kasia's jaws set and her hands snapped into fists as she squared off against him. "It's *not* a swear! If you can say it on The Simpsons, it's not a swear!"

Her voice was getting louder and louder, and Ez lowered his to compensate, forcing her to quiet down at least long enough to hear the words coming out of his mouth, although they were far from what she apparently wanted to hear. "The deplorable decay of television standards and practices," he said evenly, "is not under debate here and neither is what does or does not constitute a swear word. You and I both know what a swear word is: It's a word you wouldn't say in an address to the United Nations. Now unless you can look me in the eye and tell me you could sit down in the cafeteria and ask the Queen of England to get up under the ass-end of the Beef Wellington, then I suggest you bend over that generator and take your swats."

Kasia gave him the benefit of a doubtful pause before that look of sulky indignation crashed down over her eyes again. "I'm getting a little tired of tipping over your appliances every time you get the urge to slap somebody around," she announced.

"What a coincidence," he countered. "Because I'm getting tired of having to suffer through the same onslaught of suspicion every time you get caught breaking the rules. The very few, very reasonable rules."

"Oh *fine*!" she shrieked, actually shrieked, so suddenly and viciously that Ez stepped back in alarm. "Just hit me already and let's get on with it, Jesus jumped-up-on-a-golf-cart *Christ*! Stupid fucking rules! Fuck!" she snarled back at him. "Fucking rules! Fuckity fuck-fuck *fuck*!"

The sheer volume and unexpectedness of the outburst left Ez genuinely agape, but the onslaught of four-letter words

she used to punctuate herself only served to bring him out of it. He stepped up fast and thrust one finger warningly under her chin. "That's enough," he said.

"You're goddamn right that's enough," she snarled, swatting his hand to one side. "That's enough of your prig morality plays, enough of your 'reasonable' fucking rules, and more than goddamn enough of your Daddy Knows Best *bullshit!* Now I am here to *work*, buster, not to be play the lead role in your own cast production of *My Fair Lady!*"

From the looks of it, she had plenty more to say, but on the subject of enough, Ez had limits of his own. He caught Kasia at the elbow, swung her around, and delivered three hard swats to the seat of her jeans as a preliminary to what he was gravely certain would be a prolonged lesson.

Kasia didn't bother to struggle, she skipped straight to fighting back, and not in the quasi-dainty, slappy-scratchy way of most modern women of Ez's experience. No, Kasia flung herself into him like a linebacker and gave him two solid socks to the kidney that any streetfighter would have been proud of. It knocked him off-balance and sent them both crashing to the ground, but Ez didn't lose his grip on her and he didn't even lose his temper, although his personal star of affection for her was considerably dimmed. Despite a certain amount of raw power, not to mention a good eye for aim, Kasia was outmatched. Ez had her wrists pinned at the small of her back in seconds and her kicking legs vised tight between his own.

"You know," he began, and then paused to lay a hefty wallop to the bucking target of her bottom. Kasia's half-

screamed string of curses cut off in a whoof of air at the impact, and Ez began again. "You know, I think even you have to admit that this kind of behavior is inexcusable."

Kasia tried to toss her hair out of her eyes enough to see him over her shoulder, with only partial success. She bared her teeth, breathing hard, and didn't answer.

"Not to mention completely uncalled-for," he continued, and allowed some measure of his confusion to dampen his otherwise-stern features. "I mean, wow, you punched me in the stomach! Twice! You don't find that just a tad extreme?"

She was already flushed, but it seemed to Ez that she colored just a little more before she turned her face back into the dust. Again, she didn't answer, but this time Ez just let the silence draw out until finally she muttered something.

"I didn't quite catch that."

"I said, I didn't want a spanking."

He couldn't quite keep the incredulity out of his voice as he said, "You went about proving it in a weird way, didn't you?"

She hunched over a little further. "I guess so," she mumbled, and then peeked back around at him without much hope. "Are you going to spank me?"

"You bet. Once for swearing and once for sucker-punching me."

She pulled half-heartedly against him, but it was a weak attempt at struggling and she didn't keep it up for long. "All right, fine," she sighed, and leaned her forehead into the ground.

Milk-eyed acquiescence was well and away the last thing Ez expected, but he didn't take it for granted. He kept his grip



on her wrists firm as he started to spank her. Kasia jumped and gasped at the first crack of his hand, but then locked herself in a grim sort of silence and did nothing more as he paddled her. Over and over he swung, connecting sharply with his unmoving target, until his arm was sore and his palm was stinging and every inch of her bottom was well-spanked. At last, his own sense of fair play told him it was time to stop, even though the set of her shoulders and her stony silence made it clear that he hadn't really accomplished anything.

He released her, not entirely unmindful of the way she scrambled mistrustfully away from him before rising, and stood up, stretching his cramped limbs. "Okay," he said cheerfully, flexing his hand as he strode back to the mixer. "You grab that end and let's get this thing moved."

Kasia moved cautiously to take her side, eyeing him over the top of the machine as she bent to get a grip on it. "And we're done?"

"One down, one to go," he replied. "We'll get this moved, you can have your second spanking, and then I'll mix up the plaster, and then maybe we'll get some work done."

"Down there?" Kasia straightened up and looked at the tarp-flapped opening to the T-Rex site as though it were a portal to the ninth circle of Hell. "But there's nothing to lean on!"

"You can lean on me, I don't mind."

"I don't want to lean on you!" she snapped. "You're going to be the one hitting me!"

"Are you going to help me move this mixer or what?" he asked patiently. "It's really not in your best interests to start coming over all attitude at this point in time."

She seized the mixer and heaved it up so that he had to lurch a little in order to keep up and prevent the heavy equipment from crashing expensively back to the ground, but she didn't give him the chance to reprimand her for her abruptness. "Have you ever met a woman you didn't think you had to hit?" she demanded, color rising again in her cheeks.

"Of course I have," he replied, startled. "Several. Not to mention a vast number of men I thought could really use a little time in the back of the barn. This isn't a gender thing, Miss Payne, and as long as we're on the subject," he added, frowning, "I'd like to request that you stop referring to a little disciplinary spanking as 'hitting' or 'beating' you. Hitting is different, like when you punch somebody in the stomach," he emphasized as he saw her mouth open for argument, and she immediately flushed and dropped her eyes.

"Why do you even care?" She wasn't arguing now, she just sounded tired and thoroughly miserable. "Who am I hurting when I swear? What difference does anything I say make?"

"An over-dependence on curse-words in casual conversation is the trademark of a lazy mind," he answered, and carefully navigated himself backwards down the rough earthen stairs into the dig site before continuing. "You're smarter than that. You shouldn't need them to make a point about how to carry a plaster mixer of all things."

"Oh sure." Kasia rolled her eyes. "You're spanking me as a form of self-improvement. Sell me anything, buster."

Ez nodded at an alcove for direction and together, they lowered the mixer to the ground. "That's exactly why I'm doing it. The more we're aware of bad habits, the better we can address them," he said, and straightened up. "Didn't you ever want to lose a bad habit?" he asked her.

"No." She lifted a hand to indicate the close confines of the dig as though it represented the whole world around them. "What would be the point out there?" she asked, and stuck her face forward with a curtness that might have been aggressive if not for the haunting desperation he found in it. "I am as good," she said quietly, "as I am ever going to get."

"I don't believe that."

There was something in her eyes when he said that, but she looked away and he lost it before he could identify it. "Fine," she said, dropping her hands to her sides. "Just as long as we're clear on the fact that I'm getting spanked because of your pig-headedness and not mine. Where do you want me?"

"Pick a wall," he invited. "But first, I want you to skin out of those jeans." She jerked around at that, but he went on calmly before she could mount an argument. "You don't have to take them off for little lapses like cussing—we established that yesterday and I won't go back on it, even after that phenomenal demonstration up there—but I think that throwing a tantrum and punching your supervisor merits a more severe response. The jeans come down. You can take them off or I will, but they're coming down."

She continued to stand there, mulish and silent, long enough that Ez was beginning to steel himself up to make good on his bluff, but then he saw a faint quiver of her tightly-compressed lips. A single tear glinted at the corner of one eye and then she stiffly turned her back on him. There was a moment of fumbling quiet, the curt purr of a zipper, and then she shoved her jeans down to her ankles and slapped her palms flat against the rough walls.

He could see the rosy burn of his first spanking through the threadbare cotton of her worn panties, blazing red in the places where it had torn, and there was something so heartbreaking in the sight of her standing there in her raggedy underwear that Ez wanted to call the whole thing off. Only the sure intuition that she would be humiliated more by his pity than by another spanking kept him from doing just that, but his heart wasn't in it as he took up position up beside her.

The close earthen walls, the drone of the fans and the flapping tarps above them muted the sharp crack of a spanking hand, but the sound of the first hoarse sob that broke from Kasia's throat was crystal clear. She seemed to collapse against the wall by slow degrees, all the steel of her tough-girl stance melting out of her with every steady smack, hiding her face in her fists as she cried. He slowed his pace, giving her enough time between blows to really feel them—not just the impact but the scorching sting of their aftermath—and she jumped and cried out with everyone.

Finally, her tears took on that exhausted quality that rendered them inaudible and her grip on the wall started to

slip. Ez landed a final slap low on her out-thrust buttocks, feeling the sizzle of bare flesh through the ripped cotton, and then stepped back. "All done," he said, and bent to help her dress herself again.

She shoved at his hands, and her sobs became groans as she pulled her jeans up over her hips.

"Come here," he said, holding out a hand to her.

She yanked back, almost falling into the wall and bucking forward when her bottom brushed it. "I don't need a da—a darn hug!" she said in a wet, quavery voice still shrill with rebellion.

Ez sighed. "Yeah, but I do." He put his arms around her and wouldn't let her shrug away, holding her until the wooden set of her body broke and she poured out a fresh wave of tears onto his chest. He swayed with her back and forth, rubbing her back and stroking her hair until she quieted into sniffles. He could feel her fists balled tight between them, a last fierce barrier to keep her safely at a distance, even in his arms.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"I know."

"I don't usually go around hitting people."

"I'm glad to hear that."

She pulled against him and this time, Ez let her go; she retreated clear to the other side of the site and looked at him from under the flyaway shock of her hair, wiping her face over and over and not speaking.

"Well." Ez looked down at the mixer and then up at the jumbled jut of fossils lining one wall. "I guess I'll go get the plaster. You want to clean up a little before we start?"

"I'm fine," she said, swiping at her eyes once more and then sliding her palms down the front of her jeans to dry them. "I'm working here. I can carry something, too."

He waved at her to follow him and they went up to the trailer. She collected an extension cord for the mixer and trudged out again, and Ez watched her go before stooping to get a bag of plaster. She had everything hooked up and ready to go by the time he finished lugging the necessary components of plaster, water and a bag of burlap strips down to the bone room, and she sat and watched wanly as he talked her through basic mixer operations.

"The idea here is to wrap a jacket over all the exposed tops of the bones, wait until it dries, and then I number the jackets and you finish cutting them out of the ground and wrap them the rest of the way up." He paused, and she nodded to show she was listening, but her eyes were trailing over the fossils, silently counting and cataloguing no doubt. "Taking those out of here is probably going to uncover a few more fossils, and when that happens, I'll show you how to expose them properly so I can take some pictures so you can proceed to wrapping them in jackets, so I can number them, so you can cut them out of the ground, etcetera etcetera, ad infinitum. Questions?"

"When you're done spanking me, does that mean I'm completely forgiven for whatever I did to get spanked?" she asked.

Ez blinked, eyebrows peaking. "I was kinda expecting a fossil-related question, but yeah, that's what it means. Clean slate, and we move on."

"So you can't hold it against me that I punched you on my first day of work?" she pressed, her eyes narrowing.

"No. We took care of that."

She looked at him for a long time and then finally glanced at the bones. "Okay." She stood there for a little bit, frowning, then looked at him again. "It's kind of a f—of a messed up system, but I guess it works." She knelt down by the mixer and reached for the bag of burlap, the metaphorical shutters slamming shut as she got her working face on. "Do we soak these or just smear stuff on one side or what?"

Ez dropped down beside her and demonstrated the highly-underrated art of burlap-dipping, watching her from the corner of his eyes the whole time. Finally, he said, "Tell me something, Miss Payne."

She tensed, gave him a hard look. "What?"

He spread his hands guilelessly. "Anything. Just talk to me. We're going to be working together for six weeks! Let me hear your life story!"

She stared at him, dipping burlap bandages with stony indifference, and finally shrugged and turned to address her first fossil. "The life and times of Kasia Payne," she intoned expressionlessly. "A saga in one act. Girl loses family at young age, lives on streets, travels yearly from Seattle and Orange County, where the jobs are, to Georgia, where the weather is nice. Meets paleontologist who teaches her not to swear and she lives happily ever after. The end."

Ez waited for a bit, but there was nothing else forthcoming. "That's it? There's got to be more than that!"

"Sure there is," Kasia replied evenly. "But those are the bones of it, and bones is all you're going to get."

Ez continued to dunk and wring out bandages, keeping what was for him a prudent silence, but never taking his eyes off her.

"Now let's talk about something else," Kasia suggested, thawing with an obvious show of effort that Ez nevertheless appreciated. "Dinosaurs or something."

"Sure thing," Ez said agreeably, and launched into his prize-winning lecture on the importance of coprolites, but all the while he was thinking, 'Miss Payne, you poor kid, I make my living fleshing out old bones. You haven't got a chance.'

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## **Chapter Four**

If there was one quality that Kasia Payne could honestly say she possessed and was pleased about, it was that she wasn't afraid of a little hard work. She'd held a lot of jobs in her life, and every one of them got her hands dirty, whether it was orange-picking in Terra Bella, winter storm cleanup in Seattle, golf-course groundskeeping in Atlanta, or even that hellish stint she pulled as Minnie Mouse in Disneyworld. She was used to long, harsh, sweaty hours, and was proud of her ability to hold up under them and get the job done, but it only took three days for her to decide that paleontology was where the longest, harshest, sweatiest hours of them all were hiding.

The conditions were torturous. During the day, the heat was on her like a lead shirt and at night, the cold stabbed into her joints. Aboveground, the air was dry and yellow-tasting, chapping her lips and giving her nosebleeds, but inside the tarp, the tang of days-old sweat wettened every breath until she could hardly stand herself.

And then there was the labor itself—kneeling on stone, breathing sand and dust, scraping away at millennia of petrified time with paintbrushes and garden trowels—labor that sank in and slowly tightened until her whole body was one big knot of screaming muscle. She felt it in her neck first, all that bending and craning and holding her breath as she eased each bone from its ancient bed. Then her back, her hips, her knees, her arms, and on and on until the end of the

day, when she emerged from the tarp like an old woman, hunched and unsteady, hook-handed and glazed of eye. Then she would collapse at the campfire for a massive bowl of Professor Esben's chili mac and crawl into her tent to sleep the empty, dreamless sleep of the utterly exhausted before she had to wake up and do it all again.

And she was having the time of her life.

The first time she lifted a plaster capped fossil out of the wall and saw a pale grey corner of hidden bone beneath, she was hooked. Not just *a* bone, but *her* bone. A new bone. A bone *she* found.

It took her a few hours of plastering the other finds to work up the nerve to ask Ez to come and look at it. Which he'd done agreeably enough, frowning and mm-hmming over the nub as Kasia stood nervously to one side, before saying, "It's a bone all right. Good eye, Miss Payne."

It had turned out to be not just one bone, but one of more than thirty, all tangled together. Rather than bring them all out individually, Ez had ordered her to remove the entire fragile cluster at once, along with the slab in which the bones were buried, a simple command which had translated into twelve exhausting hours. The plaster-wrapped slab went into the truck, and then into Ez's book, where it was labeled Sara 11-C-17. Her first find. Cocaine could not be more addicting.

So Sunday, her first day off, the first day since she'd signed on that she had a chance at a hot shower and a milkshake, Kasia got up, got dressed, got her paintbrush and her garden trowel, and got on her hands and knees to get to work. She was in Bob-a-saur, of course; Ez wouldn't let her

work in any of the other sites, because if she actually found something, the records would show she'd been working on her day off and there were liability issues.

"Whereas if I work in Bob," Kasia concluded, "your bosses will know I was working on my own dime?"

"Whereas if you work in Bob," Ez corrected, "you won't find anything, because Bob is empty. You're wasting your time, Miss Payne."

"Well, that's what weekends are for," she replied, unruffled, and went back to work.

"No, weekends are for cleaning out the garage and organizing your tupperware drawer." Ez frowned around at the walls, clearing his throat loudly so she'd know he was frowning. "You're going to bake in here."

"I've got a fan on."

"You'll get dehydrated and die."

Kasia, without turning around or even raising her head, put down her paintbrush, picked up a bottle of water from the mini-cooler at her side and waved it over her head before drinking from it.

"You won't get a shower," Ez reminded her.

"Oh well."

A long pause followed, and then Ez came around to one side of her and scuffed the toe of his sneaker along the ground. "I'll be lonely."

"You could always stay and help me," she said, unmoved.

"Yeah, well, I could always take up macramé and learn Portuguese, too, but I'd rather have a shower and a Hi-C." Ez

heaved a sigh big enough to set the tarp flapping, and scuffed his sneaker again. "Come onnnnn!"

"Don't wheedle at me."

"I'm a desperate man."

"Go be desperate in Starvation." Kasia chipped out a rock, studied it, chucked it to one side and hunched over again.

"I'm working here."

Ez didn't move and when Kasia gave up on ignoring him and looked around, he was no longer smiling. "I'm not particularly comfortable about leaving you here on your own," he said.

"Are you for real?" she demanded, with a short, stunned laugh. "I have hiked on my own down Sunset Boulevard after dark, buster!"

"Yeah, but—"

Kasia planted her hands on her hips and squinted up at him, not yet angry but definitely getting within earshot of that emotion. "You said I could do whatever I wanted on my day off, and I want to dig! So stay or go, man, but stop trying to scare me."

Ez scratched the very tip of his bearded chin, a gesture Kasia had come to recognize as a weakening will. At last, he said, "The Rules still apply. You don't go one foot further than the biffy."

"Okay, okay."

"And I expect you to drink at least six bottles of water while I'm gone." Ez backed up to the foot of the stair and lingered. "I'll bring you back a cheeseburger or something, okay?"

"No onion on mine." Kasia renewed her examination of the wall, doing her best to dismiss him. "See you 'round, boss."

"I'm trusting you," Ez said quietly. "Be careful."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say something sassy about sand sharks, but Kasia bit it back with an effort and waved instead. "Have a nice drive," she called, but any answer was lost in the flapping of the tarp as Ez crawled out of the dig. A few moments later, the pickup's engine sputtered to life and finally Kasia was alone.

"Peace," she muttered and heaved a happy sigh. "Peace and quiet." She began to scrape away at the wall again. "Quiet and peace." She brushed the dust away fastidiously. "And quiet."

For the first time in days, no one was talking except her. No one was standing behind her playing Jamaican drums on his pecs while he waited for lunch to be ready. No one was making Mini-Mummies out of plaster and extra burlap strips so he could re-enact Abbot and Costello Meet Ramses later that night. No one was singing *Old Man River* in his deepest voice while he shaved out of a plastic Powerpuff Girls cereal bowl. No one was here.

"And I am not lonely!" Kasia declared, scraping at the wall even harder. "I'm not in the least lonely and I don't miss anyone because I don't even like the guy. He spans me, for crying out loud, and he makes me say 'for crying out loud' instead of 'for Christ's sake' like any regular person, and he is unbelievably—oh, hello."

A chunk of rock had just dropped out of the wall, exposing a mud-colored bump that was probably bone. Kasia brushed

it clean, decided it was definitely too smooth to be rock, and started hunting for its edges. Not a shard, she realized. A whole bone, maybe even a big bone. She was going to need a better digger. "Empty, eh?" she murmured, ferociously pleased with herself. She couldn't wait for Ez to get back and find out he was in trouble for letting her dig on her day off after all.

The bump became two bumps, and then three, and then five, and then there was a pitted place below the bumps and Kasia realized she was looking at an eye socket with a knobby ridge above it.

"It's a skull!" she cried, and leapt to her feet, looking wildly around, bursting with the need to tell someone. She soon concluded she was just going to have to sit there and burst because Ez was going to be gone a while.

But maybe she could surprise him with a fully-exposed skull when he got back. For a second there, Kasia actually heard the Professor's good-humored, "Good eye, Miss Payne," and her whole heart glowed with pride and pleasure. She dropped back to her knees and continued her enthusiastic (yet careful) hunt for the skull's dimensions.

It was a big skull, bigger than her own at any rate. Sure, it wasn't as big as that T-Rex in the Kazakhstan story Ez was always trying to tell, but Kasia was still pretty excited. She wondered what it was.

Mostly Utahraptors, Ez had said of the fossils at the site. Some Maiasaur and some Iguanadont. The mass of bones and fragments she'd found at the back of Sara Topps would probably turn out to be Trodonts, and Ez's students had found

pieces of a Gastro and two turtles. Lots of different dinosaurs had died in the flood and washed up in the river's U-bend where the other dig sites were, but the Bob-a-saur site was supposed to be back along the riverbank. Anything that had died here was supposed to have simply been flushed away until it got hung up in one of the other sites. Bob-a-saur was supposed to be empty.

Then again, the skull was up a bit higher than the other bones—mid-way up the wall rather than set into the floor—and Bob wasn't as deep as the other sites anyway. Maybe this skull was more recent than the bones from the flood. Ez would probably take one look at it and know exactly what it was and what killed it and when. She could hardly wait to show him.

Kasia was not aware of time passing as she cleared more and more rock from the side of the skull, but at last, she was looking at something tantalizingly complete—an upper skull, a lower jaw, and a hint of paler color in the surrounding stone that might be more bones. The skull was lying almost perfectly flat, in perfect profile, and in its one-eyed stare, Kasia could almost imagine something sleeping, head resting on as-yet-undiscovered paws. The socket was about the size of her fist; the length of the whole thing about equal to her forearm. Sharp teeth, and lots of them, meant this was a carnivore, which was about the extent of Kasia's dino-facts.

A nice big bone. She could go to sleep tonight cozy in the knowledge that she'd accomplished something.

Suddenly, Kasia realized she could hear something.

She had no idea how long she'd been oblivious to the world, but all the giddy thrill of discovery come rushing back, along with a ravenous desire for a cheeseburger, and she scrambled up and ran stiffly for the stairs.

But it wasn't Professor Esben rattling around by the trailer after all. It was Dr. Brimstone and he was at full skulk, opera cape flapping in the breeze as he tested the padlock on the trailer's doors.

Kasia stood there, half in and half out of the dig, and watched The Man Who Would Be Evil try unsuccessfully to pick a padlock with a credit card. After a few moments, she finished crawling out from under the tarp and stood up, checking around in case Rocky and Hugo were also present in camp. They weren't, so Kasia strolled a few steps closer.

"Can I help you?" she said loudly.

Brimstone's scream was exactly that of a six-year-old girl upon seeing her first scary Shih-tsu. He spun around so fast his hat went flying, and thrust his credit card out like a crucifix.

Kasia frowned at it, then at him, and finally bent and recovered Brimstone's hat before it could roll off to have its own evil adventures in the desert. When she straightened, Brimstone had recovered himself nicely, tucked away his makeshift lock-pick, and was twirling his mustache around his pinkie finger. He accepted his hat with a sinister, "Thank you, my dear," and was only blushing a little.

"Can I help you?" she said again, somewhat more aggressively.



"No, no, not at all, not at all. I've only come to—" His eye lit on the breakfast campfire and he swooped down and seized Professor Esben's mug (Archeologists do it in the Dirt!) and thrust it out at her with both hands. "—to borrow a cup!" he declared triumphantly.

"Of?"

"A cup..." Brimstone's eye was wandering again. "A cup of ... of corn nuts!" he finished, and immediately frowned at himself.

Kasia glanced to one side, studied the little flap of corn nuts foil wrapper fluttering half-out of the garbage box, and then gave Brimstone a long, silent stare.

"They are essential," Brimstone said, with great dignity, "to my work."

"Well, all right. Let's see what I can do." Kasia took the mug and went to her tent, unzipped it, climbed in, and came out again in short order with two pouches of corn nuts.

"Ranch or Bar-B-Q?" she inquired politely.

Brimstone blinked. "Er ... I must consult my notes." He withdrew a pocket planner, examined something that looked suspiciously like a coupon for Rogaine, and tucked it all away again, saying, "Ranch," with great confidence.

Kasia handed over the correct bag of corn nuts. She kept Ez's mug. "Listen," she began, quite causally. "As long as you're here, and I'm here, and we're all ... being neighborly."

Brimstone slipped the corn nuts into his inner jacket pocket and peered at Kasia guardedly. "Yes?"

"Well, it's just that I was looking around earlier and we appear to be fresh out of cotterpins." Kasia clasped her hands

together and gave Brimstone her most innocent smile. "Would you," she said, "perchance have any to spare?"

Brimstone's expression was beyond description or price.

"Please?" Kasia added.

He frowned at her. She smiled at him.

"Cotterpins?" he echoed.

"For the hand cart." Kasia realized she had only the vaguest idea of what a cotterpin was, and Dr. Brimstone's small-cornered-rodent expression seemed to demand some further amplification. "Those groovy little gadgets that hold the cotters together."

"Well I ... I suppose I could ... perhaps...." Brimstone squirmed, throwing wistful glances over his shoulder, presumably at the avenue of his escape. "I believe I may have ... one or ... or two in surplus," he admitted. "I could ... that is ... in the spirit of good neighbors...."

"Thank you so much, Doctor," Kasia gushed. "How generous of you!"

Brimstone's right eye ticced. He pushed out a smile with an effort that Kasia could almost hear. "Why, it's nothing at all, my flower! I am honored to be of service in whatever small way I can." He twirled his mustache at her to prove his sincerity. "But, that is, if one may inquire ... Where has your employer run off to, leaving you in such a vulnerable circumstance?"

"Professor Esben? Oh, he knows I'm always armed," Kasia replied cheerfully, and pretended not to notice Brimstone's hearty step back. "But as a matter of fact, he should be back any minute now. I actually thought you were him when I

heard you moving around out here." Kasia paused and gave the padlock a pointed look while Brimstone adjusted his hat and looked piously heavenward. "Hopefully, he'll get back soon."

"Hopefully?" Brimstone echoed, looking startled. "See here, I was on a perfectly innocent quest for corn nuts!"

"No, I know, I just...." Again the desire to show off her find bubbled up, and this time, Kasia wasn't alone. "I just want to show him this great bone I found."

"Ah." Defensiveness melted and scholarly indulgence took its place. "Yes, of course. The thrill of discovery—that resin that binds the boards of diligence in the paleontological boat. How I envy you," he continued, going theatrically misty-eyed. "In the green days of my own apprenticeship, each new fossil unveiled from the clasp of invidious terra firma was, to my eyes, an *objet trouve* envisaged by the gods themselves. Oh, for the halcyon days of youth!"

She couldn't even spell some of those words. "Uh huh."

"May I see it?" Brimstone asked. "Perhaps I could educate you on the science of your find beyond my, ah, dear colleague's no-doubt superlative recipe for plaster."

Kasia bit her lip. Ez had never told her not to show Brimstone around ... and not even the Paleontologist in Black could carry off a fossil still three-quarters buried in rock. And besides, if she said no, he'd get all suspicious and maybe come back to cause more problems and surely Ez wouldn't want that.

"Okay," she said, and led the doctor over to Bob-a-saur's tarp.

"How delightfully rustic," Brimstone announced as he descended. "I suppose the Professor feels that using the more primitive tools of our trade lends a certain legitimacy to the ... to ... the ... atmosphere."

Kasia stood proudly beside her skull and beamed as Brimstone trailed off into silence. He was staring, his mouth agape, his mustache drooping, and Kasia just could resist needing a little. "I think it's a head bone," she said.

"Ungh," said the doctor.

"Not bad for a halcyon youth, huh?"

"Ungh." Brimstone started to extend one hand, but then froze as the sound of an approaching engine purred up from the distance. "Zounds!" cried Brimstone, and then whipped around in a swoop of black cape and leapt up the stairs.

"Zounds?" Kasia echoed, her eyebrows at their peak, but Brimstone was already gone. Smiling, she picked up her empty water bottles so she could prove she wasn't dehydrated and went to welcome the Professor back.

Ez hopped from the cab of the truck with a plastic bag from Pop's Diner in one hand and a half-melted slushee in the other and called, "But hark! What black-garbed gazelle is that that bounds in full retreat across this desert? Do I detect the sulphurous smell of Brimstone? And have you been drinking your water, Miss Payne?"

She held up the bottles before dropping them in the garbage box. "You just missed him."

"We recycle here, Miss Payne. What did he want? No onion, right?" he added, sniffing the contents of a styrofoam box speculatively.

"He needed a bag of corn nuts to complete his plans for world domination," Kasia explained, depositing the water bottles in their correct box before accepting her cheeseburger. "And I showed him the bone I found in empty old Bob. I hope that's okay. You never told me not to."

"Can't say I'm thrilled, but there's no harm in it—wait a sec. You found a bone in Bob? A whole bone?"

"A skull."

"A sk—! Oh for Pete's sake, beginners get all the dumb—! Darn it all to heck!" Ez stomped over to Bob and disappeared.

Kasia sat down with deep satisfaction to eat her burger. She'd found a bone, she'd arranged for cauter pins, she got a cheeseburger and a cherry slushee, and she'd almost honked the Prof off enough to use a real swear. It had been, she reflected, a very good day.

\* \* \* \*

Ez was only irritated when he first saw the skull. There it was, centered in the cross beams of two carefully balanced flashlights. In perfect profile, no less, and cleanly exposed, the way Hollywood thought every fossil should look and the way they never actually did. Until now.

It was mocking him.

Oh, but this was only an irritant. He wasn't shocked until he got up close.

His first thought—Who in the heck are you, bub?—blew away the instant his eye lit on that knobby browline. Ez's mouth opened, but no sound came out. For the first time in his entire life, he was speechless.

Slowly, he became aware of other things: that flatness along the top of the skull, the curve of the lower jaw, the bowing of the cheekbones. And as each new feature registered, a little more awareness came trickling back into his brain, until finally he was capable of comment.

"*Kasia!*" he bellowed. And when she didn't materialize out of the ether at his elbow, he bellowed again. "*Miss Payne!*"

"Jes—er, Jeepers, guy!" The tented tarp snapped open and Kasia stomped down the stairs, still holding half a burger in both hands. "Jeepers Creepers, even! What, already?!"

Ez pointed on the skull and, doing his best to keep any hint of accusation out of his voice, said, "Brimstone saw that, is that what you're telling me?"

Honestly, he wasn't trying to attack her, but the look on Kasia's face told him he hadn't been one-hundred percent on-target. She looked down at her cheeseburger and swallowed; clearly all her appetite and enjoyment had gone. "Yes," she said softly.

"It's okay," Ez said again. "I mean, it would have been okay if that was any other bone, any other bone at all. You didn't do anything wrong, hon."

"Then what is it?" she asked, not looking in the least convinced by his assurances.

Ez opened and closed his mouth a few times, trying to pick his words carefully.

"What?!" Kasia all but yelled, her fingers digging into the burger hard enough to tear the bun.

"I don't know what that is," Ez said finally. "And I'll be honest with you, Miss Payne, I ought to."

Kasia looked at the skull, then at him, and shrugged, uncomprehending.

Speaking slowly, as though she were a deer he was trying not to spook, Ez said, "I'm going to have to look at a few things first, but—gosh, I just can't believe the luck of some people—but I'm reasonably certain that the reason I don't recognize that skull is because no one's found one before."

Now there was a flicker in Kasia's eyes. She lowered her burger to half-mast and frowned at him, reacting to uncertainty as she always did, with suspicion. "Are you saying I discovered something?" she demanded.

Ez didn't think he had ever been so jealous of anyone in his whole life, not even when he was eight, and his best friend Brody got a pony for Christmas when all little Emory got were new church shoes. "Maybe," he muttered.

Kasia stared hard at the skull and slowly sunlight poured over her face in the form of a beatific smile. Serenely, she declared, "I shall call him Bobasaurus."

"Eat your burger," Ez snapped.

"Hey boss, do I get a bonus for discovering a new dinosaur?"

"No," Ez said. And added maliciously, "But I bet I do."

"How about a toaster, then? Can I have a toaster?"

"No, you can have a cherry slushee and that's it."

"Aww." Kasia gave him a mustardy pat on the cheek and took a hearty bite of her burger. "you might find one someday, Professor. Hey, you know what I bet? I bet the whole skeleton is in there!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Ez said shortly. "The whole skeleton is *never*—"

He stopped himself right there, fearful of jinxing himself. "Anyway," he continued. "The point is, if Damien Brimstone saw that skull, then he is at this very moment madly trying to identify it, and I personally don't think he can. That means that come tomorrow, we can expect him to try and steal it, so priority one is getting it out of the ground and locked in the trailer."

"Does that mean the rest of my day off is cancelled?"

"No, no! By all means, spend the rest of the day doing exactly what you were doing this morning." Ez flashed her a grin and headed for the stairs, shrugging the tarp aside. "Digging, cleaning, brushing ... leaving your tent unzipped," he finished, startled.

"I did what?" Kasia popped up beside him, chewing on the last bite of her lunch, and studied the hanging flaps of her open tent, at first baffled, and then dismayed. "Oh no! I was so focused on Brimstone! I forgot!"

She started to duck past him, but Ez caught her arm.

Naturally, her response to restraint was a swift, hard yank back and two balled fists. "What?" she demanded, her brows slamming down to armor her eyes. "I'm going to—"

"Let me check it out first."

"Oh come on! It's only been like, twenty minutes! Nothing has happened!"

"Let me check it out first," he said again, enunciating in such a way as to let her know this was not a request.



Kasia retreated with an exaggerated show of contempt, but there was a look of real fear hiding in her eyes that comforted Ez with the knowledge that, despite her loud protestations to the contrary, deep down she knew a lot could happen in twenty minutes between scorpions and open tents. She stayed in the opening of Bob-a-saur, watching as Ez peered into the tent, and suddenly called out, "You're not going to find anything, you know. This is a complete waste of time!"

Ez didn't comment on the nervous timbre to her words. Instead, he said merely, "To quote an enlightened young lady of my acquaintance, that's what weekends are for."

Kasia's backpack was closest at hand, so Ez picked it up and checked the flaps and straps for clingers-on. Kasia immediately launched herself from the dig site and snatched it out of his hands, swiftly tugging at the already-zipped zippers to make sure its contents were still hermetically sealed and glaring at him.

"Relax, Miss Payne," Ez said calmly, peeling back the edges of her sleeping bag. "Your secret stash of Yu-Gi-Oh battlecards is still safe."

"Ha ha, hilarious, but it's *my* stuff and you don't need to be pawing through it."

Ez rolled up the empty sleeping bag and passed it out to her, now turning his attention to the dark, inviting space beneath the air mattress. "Mm-hm. Would you please bring me a bowl and a plate from the trailer?"

He heard a sharp intake of breath behind him, and then a scratchy little squeak of a voice he almost couldn't recognize, despite knowing for a fact who had to be talking.

"You found one."

"Yup. Just a little one. Probably not very dangerous, but I'm still not going to pick it up with my hands." Ez lifted up the mattress a little more, enough to scan the underside for any other hitchhikers, and also enough for Kasia to clearly see the tiny, pale creature curled up comfortably beneath.

"He doesn't appear to have brought any friends, though. That's lucky. And incidentally, Miss Payne, you keep a really clean tent. I'm impressed."

"Thank you," she said woodenly, and moved off toward the trailer, holding her bedding and her backpack close to her heart, like a small child clinging to her teddy.

Ez and the scorpion rested serenely in one another's company while listening to the distant sounds of rummaging. "So," Ez murmured. "Read any good books lately?"

The scorpion clicked at him.

Kasia returned, pack- and sleeping bag-less, but carrying the appropriate dishes, and handed them over. "Are you going to kill it?" she asked.

"Not on purpose." Ez lowered the bowl over the scorpion and then carefully slid the plate beneath until, hopefully, he had a nice scorpion-sized, dome-shaped prison. When he gave it a cautious shake, he heard scuttling. "Nope, he's fine. Let's go, buddy."

Ez carried his diminutive trespasser ceremoniously to the edge of camp and deposited it beside a rock, which the

scorpion immediately annexed for its own. When he turned around, Kasia had not only zipped up her tent, but had also assumed The Position over the generator. She looked distinctly green.

"We don't have to do that right now," Ez said mildly.

"I want to," she said, surprising Ez speechless for the second time in his life, and coincidentally enough, for the second time in five minutes. As if sensing his shock, Kasia uttered a shaky, humorless laugh and said, "Boy, I blew it and was wa-ay wrong, and this time, I deserve a dusting."

There was a slight emphasis on 'this time' that Ez shrewdly noticed but, in the spirit of the moment, generously ignored. "Too much crying on top of a cheeseburger will make you sick," he pointed out instead.

"I already feel sick," she said hollowly. And looked it.

"Miss Payne ... Kasia, come here. Let me tell you a story."

"If this is about that T-Rex in Kazakhstan, I don't care," she warned him, but she let go of the generator at least, and came a few steps in his direction.

Ez made up the difference and slipped an arm around his assistant's shoulders, leading her to the shade of the trailer and handing her her cherry slushee, discarded earlier and now greatly diminished by desert heat. "Only peripherally," he promised. "See, when we first got to Kazakhstan, we were all warned—all us Americans—to watch out for snakes at the site. It was practically the only full English sentence our guide knew and it got to be this running gag. Every time one of us went off alone—to the biffy or to bed, or even just to the

truck for plaster—we'd all shout 'Watch out for snakes!' It was funny."

"I guess it was one of those things you'd have to be there for," Kasia said after a moment.

"Trust me, it was hysterical. But we were *also* watching very carefully for snakes. Anyway, after a week or so, we were joined by this guy from the Geographic, and one of the first things we did after handshakes was wait for him to go off alone and shout, 'Watch out for snakes!' and then laugh like hyenas."

"Okay. When do I start to relate to all this?"

"Three days later, he was bit by one." Ez winced a little; even after all this time, the memory still had the power to punch him. "See, we were all having so much fun with the joke that we never exactly got around to explaining that the snakes were real. Well, 'we' nothing; it was my dig, I failed. Now—" Here Ez paused, looking solemnly and intently into Kasia's eyes, gauging her reactions as he spoke. "Now I don't think I failed this time. You may have slipped up, but you never underestimated the danger and I don't think you'll do it again."

"No, sir," Kasia said, distinctly and with feeling.

"So there will be a spanking," Ez concluded. "But I see no reason to ruin a nice cheeseburger in the process. Drink your slushee, Miss Payne, and we'll go pick at your bones. Tomorrow morning is soon enough for spankings."

Kasia nodded, dropped her eyes to her slushee cup, and at last offered him a wan smile. "Yeah, okay. But first thing, all right? I don't want to have it hanging over me all day."

"You're taking this awfully well."

"Man, there is a long, thick line between swearing and scorpions."

"Well, that's debatable, but you're entitled to your opinion. You can reassemble your bed now."

"Yeah." Kasia's gaze wavered and she stepped back, looking troubled. Suddenly, she blurted, "Can I sleep with you tonight?"

Ez blinked rapidly, actually reeling backward in astonishment, just as though his assistant had pulled a live ferret out of her shirt and flung it at him. 'Dear Penthouse,' he thought distantly. 'I never believed your letters were real, but there I was in the desert with a beautiful blond hitchhiker when—" Then the reality of what Kasia had just said caught all the way up with him. As celebratory reactions to finding new fossils went, that one was off the scale, even for his excitable young assistant. "Can you what?!"

Kasia blushed furiously, her hands balling into fists. "I meant on the floor! The scorp—Never *mind*!" She swung around and stalked off, banging the trailer doors open and disappearing inside.

And that left Ez staring after her, speechless yet again, and with an uncomfortable sinking sensation in his heart that left him feeling like he'd just missed his train. After a while, he turned around and went back down into Bob, telling himself it was to have another look at that skull and not because he didn't want to face her when Kasia came back out.

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## Chapter Five

The whole state of Utah wasn't big enough to hold Miss Payne's embarrassment and residual anger after the 'Can-I-sleep-with-you' incident. Confining both of them to a single dig site, especially one as small as Bob-a-saur was an icy experiment in disguising hostility. The skull there should have been an easy distraction for both of them. Instead, trying to work in a professional manner only intensified the tension between them until Ez gave up completely and called an end to the day. He wasn't surprised when Kasia stayed where she was, keeping her back to him. He didn't try to make her come up with him. He surfaced, ate a lonely can of Spaghetti-Os, and took himself to bed, letting the sounds of his assistant rattling around the camp lull him to sleep.

Sometime after dark, he opened his eyes. He lay on his cot, ears straining, oddly convinced that he had been awakened by some unknown and possibly threatening noise. After several long seconds of what passed for silence in the living desert, Ez was rewarded with a whisper-soft sound, not quite a cough, emanating from somewhere close by. It repeated itself several times before Ez realized what he was listening to: Kasia was crying.

He didn't know exactly what to do about it, either. She was obviously taking great pains to keep quiet, and he'd already humiliated her once today. But in the end, even knowing he could only make things worse, Ez just couldn't lie there in the dark and listen to another person suffering.

At times like these, he really wished his parents had made him watch more violent television as a kid.

He got up, moving as quietly as he could, and tugged on some sweats before letting himself out into the blistering cold of the desert at night. Barefoot, and not entirely unmindful of the fact that he himself had turned up a scorpion right here in the camp only a few hours ago, Ez jogged across the camp to Kasia's tent. He hesitated there for a second or two, then cleared his throat and tapped loudly on the metal arms of the tent.

All sound immediately stopped on the inside.

"Miss Payne?" Ez called, mentally reflecting that the last time he had felt this socially inept had been at his junior year's winter dance, when he'd walked *all* the way across the gym to ask Susan Ogawa to dance and she'd said no and left him to walk *all* the way back while she giggled with her best friends. This was going to play out exactly the same way, he realized glumly, except that he was wearing grey sweatpants and no shirt instead of a powder blue boy's tux with a ruffled collar and a mustard stain. Still, one had to observe the formalities of failure. "Can I come in?"

He was so certain he would hear 'no' that when the listless, "Yeah, whatever," came out of the tent, Ez had already turned and taken his first trudge back toward his own cot. He recovered quickly though, and let himself in, not without a due sense of trepidation.

Kasia was sitting on her pillow, her knees drawn up, in the smallest possible pose at the extreme upper edge of her air mattress. The sleeping bag was pushed almost all the way

down, and she was shivering a little, staring into the corner instead of at him. Her night-time attire apparently consisted only of her torn white panties and an equally ragged shell-pink tank top. Looking like that—thin, naked limbs hugging each other, and the tracks of tears on her face—she could have been a poster for the YWCA.

"Are you okay?" Ez asked.

"Of course I'm not okay!" she said crossly, and knuckled at her eyes. "I keep thinking I feel something crawling on me."

"Want me to look—"

"I don't need you to look!" she snapped, shooting him a hurt, furious glare. "I know there's nothing there, but knowing doesn't change anything!" She turned her head sharply away again, staring back into the wall of the tent as though reading her next lines there.

"Look, I'm sorry," Ez began, kneeling carefully at the foot of her little bed. "I wasn't trying to—"

"I know you weren't."

"It just caught me by surprise, that's all," Ez went on stubbornly. "When a pretty girl says something like that to me, the last thing I'm going to think about is scorpions."

Nothing. Not even a ghost of a smile.

"I've never had a female assistant before," he admitted. "It's a weird adjustment to have to make."

Now she looked at him, expressionless. "Why?"

"Things don't always mean the same thing coming from a girl as they would coming from a guy," Ez said awkwardly. "Things like, 'Can I sleep with you?' for example. It just threw me, that's all."



Kasia was silent for a short while, but Ez could see her thoughts swimming around and aligning themselves behind her eyes. At last, she sat up a little straighter and quietly said, "I woke up in a Seattle apartment with about a hundred cockroaches crawling under my shirt one time. The little ghetto I had to live in while I was picking oranges was even worse. I had to brush bugs off my food before I took a bite, every single time I took a bite. I'm *scared*!" she exploded suddenly, and burst into tears. "I'm scared of bugs! I *hate* them! I just didn't want to be alone in here!"

Ez scooted up the mattress and to his surprise, Kasia groped blindly for him instead of pushing him away. She curled up tight in his arms, sobbing hard, and he patted her back.

"I hate them!" she said into his chest.

"I know," he sighed. "I was on a dig in South America one time. Went to bed with an open can of root beer in my tent and woke up under a blanket of the biggest damn ants—"

Kasia shuddered, but the strength of her sobs eased and the fierce rigidity of her body relaxed a little.

"Look, I really am sorry," Ex said again. "Come on back to my tent tonight. Tomorrow, we'll shake yours out completely and move it over a bit. Sometimes it helps. Psychological blind, I guess, but whatever works, right?" Ez shrugged as Kasia pulled out of his embrace and offered her a smile. "I'm just saying it's helped me, is all."

"So now you're telling me you're scared of bugs, too." Kasia's voice was hard, her eyes flat and suspicious.

"No, I don't think I was ever actually scared of them, but they took a lot of getting used to. I've actually gotten a good grip on bugs," he continued thoughtfully, "but oddly enough, I am still scared of babies. Also clowns, but lots of people are scared of clowns. I'm the only person I ever met who got freaked out by babies."

She was smiling finally, but only a little. "Babies, huh? For real?"

"For extremely real. I don't know, I saw one of the Aliens movies when I was a kid, about the same time my Aunt Ida had a baby, and we had to all go out and look at it for a week. All that drool ... I think I made some bizarre mental correlation ... and then of course, I saw the movie *Ghoulies*, where the baby-looking mutant jumps out of a toilet and that was it for me and babies." He thought about it for a bit. "Was darn near almost it for me and toilets, come to think of it. My parents were somewhat less than understanding about that than about babies in general, as I recall."

She didn't laugh, but her smile did widen. "So no kids for you, huh. Gosh, that's almost too bad," she said. "No future mini-Esbens spending your retirement on cars and college educations. I guess you'll have to go on cruises and collect wine instead."

"Ah hey, I love *kids*," Ez protested. "It's just *babies* I can't handle. When they stop drooling, I'm cool." He thought about it. "I always saw myself with a couple of kids around the ol' barbeque pit on Labor Day of the Future. 'Course, I also saw flying cars and colonies on Jupiter's moons and stripey-skinned alien women who want to know more about this

Earth-thing called 'love', so you might not want to give my version of the future much credence." He gave Kasia a long look. "Ready to go to bed?"

"Yeah, I guess." Kasia got up and took her pack in one hand and her pillow in the other. "Thanks."

Ez picked up her sleeping bag and gave it several brisk shakes before folding it over his arm. "You know, speaking of the future, if something ever upsets you this much again, just talk to me, okay?"

"Oh sure." Kasia threw him a tired sort of smile as she stepped from her tent. "The way you talk to me about all the ways having a female assistant is hard for you, right?"

"It's not quite the same thing," Ez argued gently, dragging the air mattress behind him as he followed her out into the camp.

"Oh, you don't think so? It affects the way you work with me, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, but not in the same way. I mean, let me put it to you another way, Miss Payne. Are you scared of scorpions because of how attracted you are to them?"

It took Kasia stopping in her tracks and turning all the way around before Ez really realized what had just popped out of his mouth, and by then, of course, it was too late. All he could do was just look back at her, pretending he didn't feel that odd missed-the-train bereftness as he saw the utter blankness in Kasia's eyes.

"Well, no," Kasia said at last, and started walking again. "I have to admit that's not the reason."

Ez managed not to say anything else as he cleared off some space for her and then set up her bed on the floor of his tent. "You know," he said as he emerged to admit her. "I'm just too tired to be having this conversation. Let's just go to bed. Sleep," he corrected.

"Kay." She didn't appear to have noticed the unintentional *entendre*, and she certainly didn't seem the slightest bit uncomfortable as she zipped them both up inside the tent and then bedded down on the floor.

Ez resettled himself awkwardly on his cot, but lay awake for a long time, painfully aware of the fact that he was no longer alone in his private sanctum. The sound of someone else breathing in his tent ... not an entirely unpleasant sound, but not a wholly comfortable one either, since beyond the light, steady rhythm of her breath, there was only leaden silence. Ez had never been very comfortable with silence, and this one was worse than most. For the life of him, he couldn't think of how to break it.

He folded his hands together on his chest and stared sightlessly up at the roof of his tent, waiting for either sleep or daylight to come.

\* \* \* \*

It felt ridiculous to be lying here in the dark like this, both of them awake and neither one talking. Kasia felt like she'd ought to be doing something about it, but she didn't really know what. She had no experience with being witty and cheerful in the middle of the night. Trying to set someone else at ease just wasn't a skill that got a lot of exercising when

you lived the way she did, and most of the time, she didn't really feel the lack.

Well ... to be honest with herself ... most of the time, she didn't feel much of anything. Hard living, little sleep, less food, no money—absorb enough of that, and pretty soon, you don't feel much of anything. Sometimes she felt like an android, with a body she could not allow to feel pain and a brain that was little more than a calculator with memory stores. Everything she thought about could be quantified into, "How many miles is that? How much will it cost? How much do I need? How long will it take?" And nobody ever got in. She took jobs; she had no co-workers. She slept in basements and backrooms; she had no roommates. She knew people; she had no friends.

Since she was sixteen, she'd surrounded herself with other people who lived the same way, who slept in the same shelters and rummaged through the same bins, who kept her at the same distance. The other kind of people—people who went on dates and had 'mad money' and color coordinated their clothes—they were as unreal and unattainable as the people you see in movies. Sure, you knew they existed, but you also knew you were never going to interact with one.

Professor Emory Esben was a disturbing ripple in the quiet pond of Kasia's routine little world. She couldn't ignore him, and it was getting harder and harder to keep him at arm's length. And that bothered her most of all, really. She was comfortable with her cynicism, she was used to it. She didn't know how to relate to Ez without it ... but she wanted to.

He wasn't such a bad guy, really. He talked a lot, and he never took anything seriously except Rules and Spankings, but he was still a nice guy. Not even strict, really, just firm about some things, and Kasia was coming to understand that being 'firm' didn't have to make a man a hardass.

Finally, hesitantly, keeping her voice scarcely above a whisper in case Ez had fallen asleep, Kasia said, "Is it going to be a problem after all?"

Despite her efforts, her voice sounded overloud and the silence that followed actually seemed to give her words echoes, but eventually Ez cleared his throat and asked, "Is what going to be a problem?"

"Me." Kasia rolled onto her side, away from him. "Because you like me."

"Gosh, I hope not." Ez shifted on his cot and Kasia felt an itching between her shoulderblades, certain he was staring at her. "I'd hate to think I was that kind of guy."

"The kind of guy who...?" Kasia let the question dangle, genuinely curious as she waited for him to complete the thought.

At last, Ez heaved a sigh and said, "The kind of guy who gets alone with a pretty girl and instantly starts thinking with his ... shorts."

"Hm." Kasia's hand stole up to toy with the tips of her hair. She'd never heard anyone say that she was pretty before and sound that much like they meant it. She tried to call up an image of the last time she looked into a mirror; she couldn't quite remember what she looked like, but she was quite sure it couldn't be called pretty by any stretch of the imagination.

"And let's face it, you don't exactly make it any easier."

Kasia rolled over, startled, feeling a rush of heat blooming nastily in her stomach. She hadn't done a single deliberate thing to lead him on, and so help her, if he said that she did—

"I dunno," Ez continued thoughtfully. "Maybe it's the dark talking. Maybe if I could see your face, I wouldn't be saying any of this, but all kidding aside, I am attracted to you. You're going to think I'm just saying this because of how pretty you are—"

"Actually, I kind of think you've been out in the desert too long," she interrupted.

Ez laughed. "Well, maybe." And then fell silent.

Kasia lay on her side, running her fingers over and over through the same strands of hair. Finally, she said, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Ah, no." He sounded like he was smiling, but his tone held only a shadow of humor. "No, I happen to be between girlfriends at the moment."

"Did she dump you because you spanked her?"

Ez's cot creaked loudly as he sat up. "What makes you think she dumped me?"

"Girls can sense these things."

Ez grunted and lay back down. "You know, as a scientist, I don't believe in things like woman's intuition. And for your information, no, she didn't dump me because I spanked her. She dumped me because I was never home, and when I was, I always smelled like plaster."

"But did you spank her?" Kasia pressed.

"Of course I did."

"A lot?"

"At first. And then not so much. And then she went on a diet and asked me to spank her if she skipped her exercise classes or binged out on Haagen-Daaz. And then not so much again. And then we broke up."

"What did you spank her for?" Kasia asked, and immediately wondered why on earth she wanted to know. "Swearing?"

"Sometimes. Mostly though, it was for things like driving without her glasses on, or staying out in really bad weather for no good reason. Once for picking up a hitchhiker. That was a real blister-er. And once because she threw a Christmas tree at me. The whole tree," Ez mused nostalgically. "Seven foot pine. Fully decorated. Broke my favorite Spiderman ornament. That's from the Crown Hallmark series, too, they don't make those anymore."

"Did she ever get to spank you?"

"Nope. One of the great drawbacks to this kind of relationship is that I always have to be the bad guy." He shifted on his cot and when he spoke again, his words were clearer and right above her; he was looking toward her again. "And I feel compelled to point out that these weren't arbitrary, petty-minded little rules that I made up as God and Emperor, these were rules we both worked out together, in full understanding of the consequences to follow. She had 'No Swearing', 'Car Safety', 'No Throwing Pine Trees', and 'Always Leave a Note; addendum, Call If You're Going To Be Late'. Anything else, we kind of worked out as they came along."



"So what happens when you break the rules? I mean, I assume you have rules, too, right?"

"You bet. One of the great things about rules is that you always know for absolutely sure where the borders of things are." His voice turned a little wistful. "I move around a lot, Miss Payne. Most of the people I know are students or part-time assistants like you. I get on a lot of planes never knowing if I'm going to know the culture or the food or the language when I get there ... and it seems like I never get to hang on to anyone. My personal life is just a little tiny slice of Heaven-Pie, and you better believe I have rules." He was quiet for a bit, and then continued on in a lighter tone. "Let's see, there was, 'The Lid Goes Down', 'One Day A Week for Yardwork', 'Always Leave a Note, etc', and ... well, you don't need to know THAT one, that was personal. Anyway, yes, I broke 'em once in a while. Once in a great long while, I might add. And when I did, I had to write her a check."

"She had to get spanked, and you got to pay her off?" That hardly seemed fair.

"Hey, it was her suggestion. And I got to tell you, the first time I had to give her a hundred dollars, that lid stayed down every time." Another creak from the cot as he sat up again. "Out of curiosity, why all the questions?"

Kasia grudgingly rolled around until she was facing him, although she still couldn't see him at all. And that was perhaps for the best, because she was dead certain she'd never say this if she could see his face. "Maybe it's stupid," she said, "but I really think I'd feel better if I just got this

scorpion-spanking-thing over and done with. I hate having things just ... looming over me like this."

There was a click and the tent was flooded with light. Kasia threw up her arms by reflex, blinking until she could manage to look at him again. He was squinting at her, mouth skewed suspiciously to one side.

"What?" she said.

"You know, I sure didn't see any empty alien pods lying around..."

Kasia lowered her arms and gave him a half-irritated, half-humorous smile. "Look, pal, these are *your* rules!"

"Yeah, but you sure adjust to them in some weird stages."

Kasia sat up slowly, frowning as she picked through her words. "Knowing exactly where you fit in ... and where all the borders are ... is something pretty important to someone like me. And I guess I can deal with getting spanked and all that as long as I know that it puts paid to things. You know." She glanced at him. "Things like scorpions and how they get in your tent when you leave it unzipped."

"You could always use that Get Out of Spanking Free card," Ez reminded her.

Kasia shook her head firmly. "Not for this. I *did* this."

"You know," Ez said wryly as he swung his legs over the side of the cot and into what was presumably a spanker's position, "You did the other stuff, too."

"Cussing." Kasia could have left it at that; that one word held whole oceans of tone that perfectly described her feelings about swear-spankings. But the smirk with which Ez

met that word provoked her into continuing her explanation. "That's just you being a total nutjob," she said touchily.

"Excessive crudity is—"

"—the trademark of a lazy mind, Miss Payne," she chanted, rolling her eyes. "Whatever. The point is, that I know better than to leave my tent open to the kind of nature that grows out here in the desert. I knew better, I broke the rule, I earned this spanking, and ... and I just don't want it staring me in the face all night while I'm trying to sleep."

"You think you're going to sleep better on a fresh spanking?"

Kasia's mind uncomfortably recalled her earlier spanking episodes, and how it had felt trying to work afterwards. Or worse, trying to sit down and eat breakfast. Still, she'd already said she'd do it, and she wasn't about to back down now. Pride wasn't much, but it was all she had these days, and by God, she was going to use it. "I can sleep on my stomach," she said bravely.

"Oka-ay." Ez patted his knee with an expression that was part-amusement, and mostly-sympathy. "In light of the fact that I sincerely believe you've learned your lesson, *and* your willing submission to punishment, I'm going to go relatively easy on you."

Relatively. Now there was a scary word.

Kasia pushed her sleeping bag down and crawled hesitantly up and over the Professor's knee. There wasn't a whole lot of room in here for her to spread out—apart from the cot and her single-size air mattress, there was also a small desk with books and binders and papers and yes, the

Jurassic Park trilogy, as well as a couple of crates, a tiny bookcase and a weathered-looking chair with what was presumably the next day's clothes laid out on it. Properly tipped over Ez's thigh and braced up on her arms, Kasia's head came uncomfortably close to the corner of the desk, and knowing how hard he swung, she didn't want to leave it there. She fidgeted, squirmed, and finally unlocked her elbows and lowered herself until her breath puffed against the nylon floor of the tent.

It was the worst position, the most humble, the most vulnerable. She had to trust him with both her weight and her balance. She didn't have any leverage to kick, and even if she did, she'd be afraid of toppling over and breaking her neck. Her heart was pounding, and she already could not believe she'd offered to go through this.

"Now relax," Ez said from far above her. "I'm going to be a trifle familiar here. No punching."

He slid two fingers under the waist of her panties, and Kasia immediately went rigid as rock. 'What is he doing?' she thought, not quite panicked, but not too damn far from it.

But instead of taking them down, Ez swiftly pulled them up, exposing as much of his target as was possible. He gave her a pat when he was done. "Okay?" he said.

"...I guess."

"Comfortable?"

"As much as I can be while wearing a thong and facedown on the floor of a man's tent."

"Okay then. Relax, Miss Payne. I mean it. This doesn't start until you stop clenching up."

Kasia took a deep breath and forced her bottom half to loosen up, reduced to bracing herself only mentally for what she knew was coming.

Ez brought his huge hand down with a whip-crack onto her left cheek, and Kasia instantly locked up again, pushing and slapping at the floor in an effort not to struggle. Again, she grit her teeth and made herself relax, and Ez waited patiently for her to do it before bouncing his open palm off her right cheek.

'I can do this,' Kasia thought, grimly steeling herself. If she timed her breaths, if she kept her eyes shut and everything else blocked out, if she could just push this whole thing at arm's length, she could—

"I want you to count these off, Miss Payne," Ez announced, and Kasia's hard-won calm evaporated in a sharp gasp. "That was two, *this* is three, and now you go."

"I can't!"

SMACK! "Four," Ez said evenly. "Yes, you can. And I'll tell you something else, we're not going out of warm-ups and into the real spanking until you do."

Kasia's eyes went hot and itchy all at once. She squeezed them as tightly shut as she could and shoved her knuckles against them for good measure, but there was no point in resisting. She'd asked for this, she reminded herself. And once it was done, it was all done. That made her feel a little better. "Five," she said brokenly, and burst into tears.

Ez's hand cracked down obediently in time with her count, and Kasia kept track of each one, although her words were often so garbled by tears that she didn't know if he could

really understand them. She couldn't escape this pain, this humiliation. She had to be right there with it, feeling it, tallying it for him, as his hand cracked down over and over, left cheek, right cheek, up and down and center. When he'd covered her whole bottom with spanks, he'd just start over again, after she'd counted twenty, after she'd counted thirty, making her burn hotter and hotter and keep count for every last one. It wasn't until she'd counted fifty that he finally stopped.

He didn't let her up when she pushed weakly back, and Kasia sagged to the floor again, crying almost soundlessly. It didn't hurt that much. Well, it *did* hurt, but now that his hand wasn't right there, drumming new sting into her every other second, it didn't hurt *that* much. No, she could handle the pain part, but she couldn't seem to stop crying anyway. The worst part was, even the tears didn't seem to be all bad. In some horrible, mixed-up manner, the crying wasn't all a bad thing, and she couldn't understand why not. She should feel humiliated, she should feel weak. But she didn't. She hung over Ez's knee and hugged his ankle and let the tears pour out of her without caring if he saw them or not.

"All right," Ez said gently. His hand rubbed little circles over her bottom, stirring up prickly pins-and-needles where it touched, but somehow soothing all the same. "That was a good warm-up and you're almost done, but this is the part where you pay for it. Are you ready?"

Kasia nodded, gulping and swiping at her face with both hands.

Ez leaned away from her, shifting them both slightly as he rummaged through one of the crates, muttering to himself. "...know I've got one in here somewh—aha!" He straightened up, adjusted Kasia's position, and then pressed something cool and smooth and very hard to her bottom.

Kasia felt a groan rip out of her, and she started sobbing again, and sobbing harder. "I can't count those!" she heard herself stammer miserably. "I can't do it, I can't!"

"I know, and I'm not going to make you. That part's done. But this part *is* going to happen. Relax your bottom, Miss Payne. Nothing starts until you're ready."

Kasia sucked in breath after gasping breath until she was finally able to unclench herself. She was trembling with the effort, her fingers digging into her own forearms so hard that she'd be drawing blood if she didn't bite her nails, but she couldn't relax those, too. It was the top half or the bottom, and it had to be the bottom or she'd never get through the night.

She felt the implement, the paddle, whatever it was, lift off her, and she screamed helplessly even before it came whistling back down.

CRACK! The sound of it was shocking enough; the pain exploded in her a split-second later. Kasia came bucking partway off the Professor's lap despite all her resolve that she should not struggle, and she was still kicking pedaling reflexively even as she wrapped her arms around his ankle again. The paddle had seemed to cover her whole bottom, the whole thing, but Ez was taking his time before striking again, and now she could tell that he must have only hit the right

cheek because that was the place that was burning like acid all the way in to her bones. She couldn't stop gasping, she couldn't seem to pull in a whole breath without it shuddering out of her again in tears, but she could finally stop writhing and force her bottom to unlock.

Again she screamed just at the sound of the paddle coming towards her, and again she was deafened by the cannon-loud blast as it landed. 'Inferno' was too tame a word to describe what the implement did to her, but it was the only word she had, and it banged around in her head like a bird in the house as she tried vainly to control herself. 'Inferno, inferno, I'm going to *die*!'

CRACK! This time, the paddle had to have landed over both cheeks, but not up at the fullest part where most of his attentions had landed in the hand-spanking. Instead it struck low down, between the roundness of her bottom and her thighs, such a tender part of her that she tried to bolt into the corner of the tent like a crazed animal, clawing at the ground and howling.

But Ez was right there, whispering nonsense sounds into her ear as he picked her up and held her. "All done, that's it, just the three," he was saying. "Hush now, Kass, you were so brave."

Gradually, her sobs tapered down until she could draw an even breath, and her tears slowed until she reached the point where her cheek stayed dry if she wiped it. She hung on to Ez's shoulders, unsure when she'd latched onto his neck and whether it was strictly appropriate to stay there, all things considered. He was rubbing her back, which felt pretty good,



and holding her up with one arm under her thighs so her bottom didn't have to touch anything but air, which felt pretty damned abrasive for air, and she didn't think she'd ever appreciated him so much as she did at this moment. She wasn't used to having friends, and she didn't know how to talk to one, but there had to be something she could say now to sum up everything she wanted to tell him about how wonderful he was and how safe he could make her feel.

"Wow," she said finally, sniffing. "When you said you were going to go easy on me, you really meant it, didn't you, you big pansy."

Kasia's body rocked with the force of Ez's laughter, and the motion made her bottom flare and throb with renewed agony. She tightened her arms around his neck and rested her cheek on his shoulder, willing the pain to go away as she dozed.

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## Chapter Six

Ez woke up slow, as he always did, and rolled himself out of bed before his brain could convince the rest of him to go back to sleep. His foot landed square on a body.

"Oof," said the body, and a chunk of sleeping bag rolled back to reveal half of Kasia's sleep-puffed face, already twisted into an expression of irritation. "I'm moving, officer, I'm moving already. I—where am I?"

"Morning," said Ez, and fell back onto his cot, scratching all six of his chest hairs free of tangles. "Forgot you were here."

"So did I." Kasia carefully peeled her fingers away from her mouth and looked confusedly around. "I think I was dreaming. What time is it?"

Ez consulted his wrist. "Half past a freckle," he said. He didn't wear a watch.

"I was having the weirdest dream," Kasia said, sagging back into her pillow. "We were digging up bones under this bridge in L.A. where I used to stay. We had to wrap 'em in Hefty-bags because we didn't have burlap, and you kept trying to tell that Kazakhstan story but the cops kept rousting us before you could finish." She reached back and prodded gingerly at her nether quarters, frowning. "That hurts," she muttered.

"Make coffee." Ez yawned. "It'll hurt less if you move around." He leaned over her and grabbed a shirt, his shoes, and his shaving kit off the chair, then staggered out into the sunlight. He drew out half a gallon of sun-warmed water and

took half a shower as he listened to Kasia bang around in his tent getting dressed. "Did we find any?" he called, filling his palm with shaving cream.

"Find any what?"

"Bones. In the back alleys of L.A. In your dream." Ez leaned up against the pickup truck and aimed a side-view mirror at his face so that he could separate beard from stubble and stubble from skin.

"Oh. Yeah, I think so. I don't know, I'm already forgetting stuff." There was a 'zuuup', and Kasia emerged into the desert. She carefully sealed the tent back up before hobbling over to the trailer for coffee makings. "The weird thing is, I think the bones were made of metal."

Ez couldn't laugh because there was a razor skimming along over his jugular when she said that, but as soon as safety permitted, he said, "You know, it's funny you should say that. Back to Kazakhstan—"

Kasia groaned.

Ez paused and turned around, one eyebrow politely raised.

"You know you're never going to finish this," she said accusingly, and stomped over to start the fire.

"Yes, I am," he said, surprised.

"No, you're not. You're going to get distracted and stop in the middle."

"No, I won't."

"You will. You know you will."

"I won't." Ez solemnly raised three fingers. "Webelos never lie, Miss Payne."

"All right." Kasia thumped the coffeepot down in the middle of the new fire and stood up, arms folded and one hip cocked, eyeing him with undisguised skepticism. "Go ahead."

"Okay, so here we are in Kazakhstan," Ez began, and started shaving again. "We have been there for two weeks now, working on just cleaning and wrapping the exposed ribs. We have to do it in one big block, because of the sheer size of the things and how they almost seem to be fused to the spine. We don't want to try separating them out in the field, and so much of it is still underground, so we had to build this derrick-like kind of crane to tie off the wrapped ribs, and once that's done, we start digging out the rest of them. We go down two feet and it happens. We hit this—"

A 1948 Chrysler hearse suddenly loomed solemnly into view at the edges of the camp, blew the first eight notes of The Funeral March, and then pulled over. A hulking shadow sprang from the passenger side and unfurled itself into Dr. Brimstone. "Greetings!" he boomed, and planted his cane with flourish into the ground between his feet.

Kasia flung out both hands in a silent 'see?!' gesture and then turned her back on both of them to tend to the coffee.

Ez, still holding his razor just above the last stripe of shaving cream, watched Brimstone stroll into his camp. "Damien," he said finally. "Buddy. What the hell are you doing here? I know, Miss Payne," he added without turning around. And back to Brimstone: "I don't recall ever inviting you for toast and tea."

"No, Professor, I don't believe you ever have." Brimstone ran his evil eyes laconically across the sprawl of Ez's camp,

and held the head of his cane up to his nose as though it were capped with a medieval pomander instead of a pewter skull. "How dreadfully amiss, considering the negligible distance betwixt our two encampments. I imagine we would have some scintillating breakfast conversation. Be that as it may, I have not come at your behest, but at that of your delightful young companion."

Ez finished the shave, towed himself clean of residue, and only then turned around to face the aforementioned companion. "Miss Payne?" he sang out, in what he believed to be an admirable show of self-control.

She was shading her eyes against the rays of the morning sun, leaning out to one side to look past him. "Who's driving?" she wondered. "Is that Rocky? Hey Rocky! Want some coffee? We got muffins!"

The driver's door opened, and Brimstone snapped, "No muffins! Your job is to sit!" The door shut again with a low grumble, and Brimstone once more turned on the charm. "But I would certainly welcome any hospitality you were to offer, my child."

"Miss Payne," Ez said again, more dangerously this time.

Kasia handed him a steaming cup of Folgers. "Pass it over, would you, boss?" she said, and leaned over so she had a direct line of sight to Brimstone. "I'm assuming you take your coffee like you take your hats—black, right?"

"How prescient of you, my dear." Brimstone swept the coffee out of Ez's hands and sampled it cautiously. "Er," he began, his brow beetling slightly. "Instant, is it? How ... bohemian."

"Miss Payne!" Ez bellowed.

Kasia stood up and handed Ez his own mug of coffee.

"Calm down, boss, before you give yourself an aneurysm."

Ez managed to knock a few decibels out of his voice, but he didn't bother to disguise how upset he was gearing up to be. Thrusting his coffee cup in Brimstone's direction, he demanded, "What is he doing here and why did he say you invited him?"

Calmly, Kasia helped herself to a muffin. "We've got a monster big fossil to take out today. I asked him for cotterpins for the handcart."

Ez blinked at her.

"We appear to be out," she reminded him.

Ez turned around and directed his stare at the dark visitor in his camp.

Brimstone reached maliciously into his inner cloak pocket and withdrew two cotterpins. Adopting a smirk of pure evil, he held them out.

"Thanks," Ez said suspiciously, pinching them out of the doctor's palm. There was blue paint on one of the pins, paint that looked a lot like the paint he'd slopped on the handcart three years ago when he'd painted the inside of the trailer.

"Not at all, dear boy." Brimstone sipped at his coffee. "You should have asked sooner."

There wasn't a whole lot Ez could say at that point that wouldn't end in civil court, so Ez swung back on his assistant. "I can't *believe* you asked Dr. I-Will-Rule-The-World Brimstone for cotterpins!" he exploded. "That's my arch-

nemesis, for Pete's sake, you can't just waltz up and borrow hardware!"

"Please, Professor!" Brimstone's expression may have been pained, but his tone was one of pure glee. "This unprovoked contentiousness is hardly befitting of a professional!"

Kasia's answer was equally expressive and summed up the situation with its own certain succinctness. "Men," she said, and rolled her eyes.

Ez tried to glare at her, but the effect was somewhat spoiled as the side of his mouth kept trying to smile. Curse his amenable good humor! "Fine," he said, and pocketed the pins. "I appreciate it, Damien. You're a good neighbor and a true friend, as arch-nemeses go. Please, feel free to help yourself to a muffin before you go. We have apple, blueberry, and bran." He narrowed his eyes meaningfully. "You could use the bran."

Brimstone smirked. "And pray, what's that supposed to m.... oh." He glowered.

The driver's door of the hearse cracked open. "Can I have a muffin?" Rocky called.

Kasia obligingly reached for one as she called back, "What's the magic word, big guy?"

Rocky looked blank for a second or two. "Abracadabra?" he guessed.

"Close enough," Kasia sighed and started toward the hearse, but stopped when Brimstone snatched the muffin out of her hands.

Still glaring daggers at Ez, the doctor snarled, "We must be going, my dear. Thank you for your hospitality." He swung

around in a swirl of cape and stalked back to the car. After flinging the muffin in at his driver, Brimstone recovered his aplomb long enough to strike a singularly dramatic pose, one finger aimed at the heavens and one foot up on the running board of the hearse. "Rest assured, Professor, it is precisely as Euripedes said: 'I know indeed what evil I intend to do,' and you shall regret your discourtesy when the fullness of my plans have come to pass!" Another Bwa-haha-ha-ha! punctuated this alarming declaration, and Brimstone started to swing into his vehicle for retreat. He paused there, head cocked, as Rocky gesticulated, and then slowly uncorked himself from the car and sullenly said, "May we have another muffin for Hugo?"

Kasia brought him one, shrugging minutely to Ez as she passed him.

"Thank you," muttered Brimstone, clutching the muffin. He stood glaring for few seconds, then shouted, "Regret!" and ducked into his seat and slammed the door.

Kasia stood back as the hearse roared to life and pulled away. "What a strange man," she remarked.

"And you asked him for cotterpins."

"We needed them, didn't we?" She tossed her hair in a thoroughly unrepentant way and came back to the campfire for breakfast.

"No, we don't *need* them," Ez argued irritably. "We *need* oxygen. We *need* protein and ... uh ... pop-tarts. We don't *need* cotterpins. Keep it in perspective."

Kasia cocked an eyebrow at him.



"The point," Ez went on loudly, "is that Dr. Damien Brimstone is, at the very least, my rival out here, and the very last thing I need is to have him hanging out while we unearth a potentially new species of dinosaur. So I don't care if he comes hopping around offering to loan you a nuclear-powered, patent-pending, pedal-driven fossil extractor with a couple of midgets to drive it, we are officially not at home to visitors."

"New rule?" Kasia asked, looking extremely long-suffering.

Ez thought about it, and gave his best T-Rex growl. "I don't particularly want the guy to see breaking into camp as a challenge, either. Look, just use your common sense when he drops by and do whatever you can to speed up the process of getting that bone out of the ground."

"Like getting a working hand cart together," she suggested.

He looked at her. "Yeah," he said after a second or two. "Good show, Miss Payne."

"And by the way," she continued, innocently addressing her muffin. "You owe me a box of boy scout cookies, or whatever it is you owe people when Webelos lie, because you didn't finish that Kazakhstan story after all."

"Boy scouts don't make cookies," Ez said, cheerfully pouring himself a second cup of coffee. "At most I owe you a bird house I built in my garage. And since I don't have a garage handy right now, not to mention there not being any birds around here, you'll have to settle for a Webelo I.O.U."

"Ha! I can guess how good *that's* going to be, considering the Webelo who wrote it. Not only do you lie, but you cuss."

Her eyes went distinctly crafty. "Does that mean you owe me two checks for a hundred dollars each?"

"Ah-ah-ah! That sort of arrangement has to be made in advance," he continued, settling himself in his chair with a muffin. "But to further show you what a good sport I am, I'll let you push the first handcart full of plaster down those stairs. Eat up, Miss Payne, it's going to be a busy day!"

\* \* \* \*

Kasia sat on the bottom steps of Sara Topps, drinking off the last of a bottle of water and watching Ez run his hands meticulously along the floor and walls and ensure that all the exposed bones were really gone. The facing half of the skull in Bob-a-saur had been wrapped in plaster and might even be dry by now, since they'd spent almost three hours here in Sara Topps. There was a row of drying plaster bricks along the earthen wall down here that wrapped three-quarters of the way through the whole dig, evidence of a darn good day of bone-pulling. It gave her aching back and chapped hands some validation, anyway.

But at the moment, Kasia's attention was not lingering with pride over the sight of the suitcased fossils. Instead, her gaze occupied itself languidly with Ez. And to put an even finer point on it, on only certain parts of Ez. The man had a nice swing in his backyard.

Unexpectedly, Ez swung around to help himself to a handful of ice from the mini-cooler. He paused, raising a quizzical eyebrow at her, and she instantly busied herself with unnecessary adjustments to fossil blocks.

When she dared to look up again, Ez dramatically contorted himself so that he could drop a glance at the seat of his own jeans, and then went back to feeling up the wall, chuckling.

Kasia was perversely glad it was so stuffy in here, because that meant she'd already be flushed. "Well, okay," she said suddenly. "Are we just going to pretend like you never said last night that I was pretty?"

The Professor's chuckles cut off as effectively as if he'd used a pair of scissors.

"Because it's okay if that's how you want to play it," Kasia continued, with somewhat less enthusiasm in her voice. "I'd just like to have a protocol here."

He didn't turn around. "Aren't you the one with a rule that pathologically prohibits personal chit-chat during working hours?"

Kasia felt her face grow even hotter. "Well, aren't you the one who's always trying to get me to work outside the box?"

"No, actually, I'm the one who spansks you for breaking rules."

That brought her up short.

Ez heaved a sigh and finally turned around. "But I guess since that's your rule, you can break it if you want. So sure, let's talk."

They stared at each other.

"I still think you're pretty, if that helps get the ball rolling," he finally said.

Kasia frowned and dropped her eyes. "I guess you'd have to," she said. "I sure haven't given you any other reason to be friendly."

Ez straightened up sharply, looking halfway insulted. "I like to think I'm not that shallow, Kass."

"I didn't mean—" She broke off there, smacking herself roundly in the forehead. "Even when I'm trying to be nice, I screw up," she muttered. "You really *must* think I'm pretty."

"You know what," Ez began in a distinctly dangerous tone of voice, "We are not going to have this conversation with that attitude. Do I have to make a new rule about not trash-talking yourself?"

"Oh forget it," Kasia said, defeated. "This isn't working out like I'd planned and I can't handle another new rule." She shook her empty water bottle morosely and then planted it next to her boot and just waited for him to finish up.

Ez turned all the way around and came over to her at once, hunkering down so that his eyes were on a level with hers. His gaze was anxious, probing. "Is that 'This conversation isn't working out', or 'This *this* isn't working out'?" he asked uneasily. "Because I can be less of a jackass if it's that important to you."

She felt herself smiling against her will. "Isn't 'jackass' a swear?"

"No, it means 'donkey' and I used it in context. Answer the question, Miss Payne."

She lifted her chin, trying to meet his eyes squarely despite the uncertainty hollowing out her insides. Quietly, she

answered him with, "What was the question, Professor Esben?"

A silence fell, almost supernatural in its completeness. The tarps quit snapping, the wind quit rattling overhead, even the fans and the generator droned off into whispers. It seemed like the whole world was holding its breath while Ez formulated his reply.

Well, almost the whole world.

"Halloo the camp!" came bellowing in from just outside, and whatever moment had been building up between them blew away.

Kasia blinked. "Halloo?" she echoed.

Ez clapped a hand over his eyes. "What does he want now?" he groaned, and got up to trudge up the stairs. "Brimstone!" he hollered. "You better have a good reason for being here!"

"What a distinctly suspicious mind you have, Professor."

Kasia followed the man she supposed was just her employer on into the light of day and saw, not only the evil doctor, but one of his henchmen as well. Brimstone swept off his hat on seeing her and went into one of his deep bows, taking the opportunity at the very lowest point of which to smack Rocky soundly in the thigh.

"Thanks for the muffins," Rocky said mechanically, just like a doll whose string had been pulled.

"No prob, tiger," she said wearily, and went to dump her empty water bottle in the recycling bag. "What brings you here?"

"The Boss," Rocky replied, thumbing helpfully over at Brimstone. "It wasn't my idea."

"Silence, you improvident nitwit! Ahem." Brimstone straightened and adjusted his hat with a self-deprecating smile. "Actually, it is ill-fortune that blows me to your door this morning. My vehicle is in need of repairs." From some inner fold of his cloak, the doctor removed a fan belt and held it out to Ez as proof of his words. "I had hoped to prevail upon you to take me into town to purchase another."

"This looks like it was cut," Ez remarked, running his thumb along the severed edge of the belt.

Brimstone snatched it back. "It does not! Because it wasn't! Now I require transportation, and you are the vehicle of last recourse. You must help me."

Ez folded his arms calmly. "Must I?"

Brimstone scowled, slapping the broken belt thoughtfully against his thigh as he considered his adversary. "I shall purchase you a soda!" he announced. "And reimburse you for gasoline!"

"Yeah, okay." Ez sighed, shook his head, and glanced back at Kasia. "I don't know how we're all going to fit in the truck," he began. "Someone's going to have to ride in back."

"Without a seat belt?" Kasia deadpanned. "Horrors."

"I couldn't agree more," Brimstone sniffed. "Simply out of the question. Thus, I have brought my henchmen to stand in as your assistant's bodyguard during your absence."

Kasia blinked around at Rocky as Ez snapped, "Oh *hell* no!"

Brimstone began once again to reiterate his dire circumstances and Professor Esben's duty in the face of

human need, but Kasia didn't bother to pay attention. She put a hand on Ez's arm and dragged him to a slightly more private distance.

"I'm having a bad influence on you," she said. "So does that mean I get to swear freely at some point in the future or are you going to cut me that check now?"

"Don't start with me, woman, there are times when a colorful metaphor is called for and that was absolutely one of them." Ez dragged his eyes off Brimstone and glared at her. "There is no way I'm leaving you here with Brimstone's minion!"

"Okay, so the truck holds two people, and there's four of us, five if you count Hugo, who, seeing as he's not here, could in fact be anywhere."

Ez looked first startled, then speculative.

"You and I could go to town," Kasia continued, "and leave Brimstone and Rocky here. You and Rocky could go, and leave Brimstone here with me. Or I could go with Brimstone and leave you here with Rocky. Or I could go with Rocky, leave you and Brimstone here at camp, and also come home with the wrong fan belt. OR you and Brimstone could go to town, and leave me here with Rocky."

Ez bared his teeth briefly. "I think I see your point," he admitted.

"I'll be fine," Kasia promised.

Ez muttered something PG-rated but nevertheless extremely unkind on the subject of Brimstone and his fan belt, but ultimately nodded and headed for the truck. He waved the doctor irritably inside, gave Kasia a last long look,

and then climbed up into the cab. Kasia made sure to wave at the tail-lights as the pickup rolled away.

So. Alone with a minion. What to do, what to do.

"Does Dr. Brimstone ever let you excavate fossils?" she asked.

Rocky's massive slab of a brow furrowed.

"Dig up bones?" she translated.

His face smoothed out, like watching an avalanche in reverse. "Yeah. Mostly I carry stuff. Hugo does all the digging parts. Guess he's got better hands." Rocky flexed his idly as he looked around the camp. "Want me to carry stuff?"

"Sure, if you don't mind." Kasia pointed the way to Sara Topps, reasoning that she might as well put the guy to work instead of just standing around and staring at him until Ez got back.

Rocky lumbered ahead of her, puffing out his chest slightly as though overcome by own usefulness. He made no comment on the number of fossil packs laying around and didn't even glance at the hand cart. He stooped, easily scooped up a hundred pounds of bone, rock and plaster in each arm, and then straightened up again, giving her his most bovine expression. "Where do you want 'em?"

"In the trailer," Kasia answered, privately wondering if it was normal to be checking out the Professor's butt one minute and Rocky's bulging biceps the next. "I'll, uh, go unlock it."

Rocky followed her placidly up the steps. "Are these the funny bones the Boss was talking about?"



"Clowns have funny bones," she said, unthinkingly quoting Ez. "Those are dinosaur fossils, and no, they probably aren't the ones your Boss was talking up, unless he was lecturing you about trodonts."

"Clowns have funny bones?" Rocky's brow was furrowed again. "They're pretty funny guys, but I always figured they had normal bones."

'New rule,' Kasia thought, as she unlocked the trailer doors. 'Never try to be funny around an imbecile.' "Right in there, please," she said out loud.

"You must be pretty smart." Rocky deposited his fossils and shot her an unfathomable sidelong glance as he exited again. "You use a lot of the same words as the Boss and you know a lot about clown bones."

Kasia didn't particularly view Brimstone as a paragon of intellect, and she wasn't even going to try and explain about clowns and funny bones. "Huh," she said, hoping that was vocal enough to satisfy the henchman's need for conversation and noncommittal enough not to provoke him.

It seemed to work, Rocky made four more trips back and forth from Sara Topps to the trailer in plodding silence. Then, quite suddenly, he turned on her with a determined expression and said, "I got one of those whatchmacallits. A hippological question."

"Hypothetical," Kasia corrected, easing back a step.

Rocky nodded, coming forward to erase the cushion of personal space between them. "One of those," he agreed. "I knew you was smart. See, there's this guy. Not me, some

other guy. His name's ... uh.... "Rocky's eye drifted over the interior of the trailer and lit on the camping box. "Coleman."

"O-okay." Kasia was now firmly backed up against the stack of crated fossils. She crossed her arms and tried to look comfortable there. "So ... what's Mr. Coleman's problem?"

Rocky looked pained, and that was a hell of a sight to see on a face that big. "See, he works for this other guy, doing goon work, you know. Not the Boss, some other guy with goons. His name's ... uh.... "His eye wandered over to the camping box again. "Lantern."

"Got it. Go on."

"So this guy.... "Rocky trailed off and looked stumped.

"Coleman."

"Right, him. His boss wants him to do something he don't want to do. And he don't know what to do about it, 'cuz gooning's a hard field to break into these days and having your old boss mad at you can really hurt your chances of getting in right with a new one, and there's a lot of young goons out there looking for that job. So my friend, he needs that good whatzit—"

"Reference."

"Right, that, because it ain't like you get goon jobs reading the want ads, you know?"

"Yeah, I hear you, big guy." Kasia tried to leave it at that, but her curiosity got the better of her. On the grounds that she was helping to defuse an increasingly upset minion, she asked, "How did you get your job, Rocky?"

"Huh?" He had to take a few seconds to redirect his train of thought. "Oh, I got it off one a' those flyers down at the

grocery store. You know the ones. 'Goon wanted, good pay, will train, no weirdos.'" He frowned suddenly. "But this ain't me, remember? It's my friend, uh...."

"Mr. Coleman."

"Right, him. So anyway, his boss wants him to ... you know." Incredibly, Rocky seemed to be blushing. "Sweet up this one girl."

Kasia blanched.

"Win her over like," Rocky continued. "So's the girl will help him steal these, well, things, and get 'em away from *her* boss so's my friend can give 'em to *his* boss. It's a pretty good plan," Rocky finished, looking genuinely appreciative of Brimstone's evil genius.

"I see," Kasia said faintly. She still hadn't gotten all the way over the whole 'sweet up' concept. "So, what's the problem?"

"Well...." The light of admiration died and once more Rocky's face fell in distress. "See, the thing is, my friend, he's got a girl back home, you know. He don't want to be kissing and hugging on some other girl."

"Commendable."

Rocky nodded without giving any indication that he knew what the word meant. "Sure, he don't see her so often, but she's there and he don't think he'd ought to be sweeting-up some other girl. Even if his girl don't know about it, it still counts." Rocky flexed his hands a few times, looking miserable. "But I don't know what to do. It ain't like I can tell the Boss to take a flying leap."

"Your friend," Kasia corrected. "Your friend can't tell his boss—"

"That's what I said. So." Rocky looked at her hopefully. "So what do I tell him?"

With an effort, Kasia blocked out the image of herself being turned into tomato juice as Rocky 'kissed and hugged on her' so that she could deliberate on the issue. "Well, speaking as a woman, I can tell you that your friend is right when he says stuff like that still counts. I mean, you've got a girl, right?"

A slow, syrupy smile spread over Rocky's face. "Yeah," he said happily. "I got a picture of her. Wanna see?"

Before Kasia could refuse, as if she would even dare to, Rocky had dug a battered and much-folded photograph out of his pocket and was holding it out to her, beaming.

It had been taken at some kind of small-town traveling fair, the sort of cheap Polaroid that had undoubtedly cost Rocky five bucks to redeem. In it, Rocky had his arm slung around the shoulders of an extremely solid-looking blonde, and knowing as Kasia did that Rocky stood six-six in his bare feet, then this lady had to be at least six-two. She was wearing a hot-pink tee and a pair of bib overalls cut off as high on the thigh as the law would allow, and her biceps were every bit as bulging as Rocky's. The two of them were standing in front of the Test Your Strength game; Rocky was holding an enormous purple and orange panda while his girl had a sledgehammer cocked jauntily over her shoulder.

"Wow," said Kasia. It was all she could think of to say.

"Her name's Moose," Rocky said, tenderly folding up his photo.

"Of course it is." Kasia shook herself alert. "My point is, how would you feel if Moose had to, er, sweet up some guy in order to keep her job?"

Rocky's hands stilled in the act of re-pocketing his treasured picture as he considered the question. It took him a very long time.

"Well," he said at last. "I guess I'd understand." He thought about it some more. "But I guess I'd do a few things to her boss, too." Then he frowned and focused in on Kasia. "You're saying ... Moose would understand.... but she'd try to kill the Boss." His eyes were almost completely invisible underneath his forehead by now. "That makes it tough to get in good with a new boss, too."

"Yeah, that and she might have a few things to say to the girl your friend was trying to sweet up," Kasia pointed out. "Girls, well, we tend to hold a grudge. Which is why you should never forget a birthday."

"May sixth," Rocky said distractedly, still frowning.

"Or an anniversary."

"January thirteenth, April twentieth, and November second."

"What's that?" Kasia asked, amused. "First date and...?"

"First time we met, first time we went out, and first time we—"

"Oh, okay, great, thank you, that's good." Kasia patted his arm a few times to wake him out of whatever deep thought he was circling, and waved him firmly out of the trailer. "You

know, there could be a simpler answer to your friend's problem, Rocky. He could just get out of the goon biz. I mean, haven't you ever considered doing some other kind of work?"

"Naw, we've always done gooning." Rocky finally backed up a few steps, still deep in thought. "Pop was a goon. Gramps was a goon. Uncle Bruno and Uncle Max were both goons. All my brothers is goons." He paused suddenly, head tipped. "Uncle Lazlo was a banker, but he was crooked."

"Well, I just don't think your friend should cheat on his girl to keep his job."

"Who? Oh. Yeah." Rocky started backing out of the trailer. He looked a lot perkier. "I don't think so, either. I know what to do now. You know, I'm gonna head back to my camp now, okay?"

"Okay." Kasia waved him goodbye. "Glad I could help."

"Oh yeah, you helped a lot! Thanks!" Rocky lumbered off across the desert.

Kasia watched him go for a while, and then took herself down into Sara Topps to load up the hand cart. Rocky had taken most of the fossils out in a very short stretch of time, but he'd still left plenty for her to finish up on. She was hauling her tenth load when the crunch of approaching footsteps warned her she was not alone. Apparently, Rocky had just remembered that Brimstone had ordered him to be her bodyguard until the Bosses returned.

Kasia turned around, wearily resigning herself to the company of a henchman, but instead of Rocky, she saw Hugo clumping towards her. He had combed his hair, put on a tie to

go with his t-shirt, and was squeezing about six blue-spotted lizards in one fist.

"Hi," he said, and thrust his reptiles at her. "I couldn't find no flowers."

Kasia stared at them. One of them gasped. She stared up at Hugo instead.

He looked back at her blandly. "Want me to put 'em in water for ya?"

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## Chapter Seven

Despite the very real advantage (or disadvantage, depending on one's perspective) of having been a smart-alek most of his life, Emory Esben had never actually fallen down laughing before. Like being struck speechless, he'd always assumed 'falling down laughing' was just a turn of phrase. And like being struck speechless, it was a phenomenon he finally experienced thanks to Miss Payne.

Ez had come back to camp in a foul mood after his forced half-holiday with Damien Brimstone, a mood which darkened considerably when he returned to the sight of a Hugo where he had left Kasia with a Rocky. Although he felt a little better once he was able to send Brimstone, his henchman, and his fan belt back across the desert to their own evil campsite, it would have taken some generous poetic license to say that he was back to normal. But as soon as Kasia came over to lean against the side of the pickup and say, "You'll never guess what happened to me today," Ez could feel his good humor returning. And when she got to the part where Hugo presented her with his desert bouquet, he lost it completely and fell down right there in the sand and could not get up again.

It took several extremely valiant attempts before Ez could exert a modicum of self-control. He wiped his eyes, looked up at Kasia, and said, "Okay, I'm dying to know—What did you do with the lizards?"



Kasia, who, beneath a thin veneer of feigned apathy, looked absolutely delighted at the effect her little story was having, replied, "What do you think I did with them? I let them go outside camp."

"Probably broke poor Hugo's heart to see you shunning his little present. Gosh, it was thoughty of him, though." And Ez burst out into fresh peals of howling laughter.

"What did Brimstone say when he saw Hugo here instead of Rocky?" Kasia asked.

"Not a word." Ez struggled to his feet with a vast amount of personal effort. "To tell you the truth, I don't think ol' Damien can tell Heckel and Jeckel apart." He slapped at the seat of his jeans a few times, still chuckling, and said, "All kidding aside, as of right now, some things have changed."

Kasia's uncharacteristic good humor switched off, just like that, and she regarded him warily. "Such as?"

"We need to start sleeping in shifts," he said. "And it's not enough for the awake person to just be awake, either, he or she needs to be extremely vigilant and visible. Even if you just have to go to the biffy, come and wake me up first, got it?"

Kasia nodded, her brows puckering. "You really think Brimstone's going to try something as stupid as stealing the bones?"

"I'll do you one better, Miss Payne," Ez replied easily. "I will give you my personal check for one thousand dollars if he does *not* try something as stupid as stealing those bones. There are days when I think 'Something As Stupid' is Brimstone's actual middle name."

Kasia glanced over Ez's shoulder in the direction of his tent, her face still creased and confused. "Don't you have, like, a mountain of paperwork and photographs that prove we found it and not him?"

Ez winced. "Let me tell you a story," he began.

"Oh for the love of God!" Kasia shouted, slamming the heel of her hand into her forehead.

"Relax, it's not the one about Kazakhstan," he sighed.

"And although I consider the frivolous use of the Lord's name to be akin to swearing, I'm going to let this one slide because I have the distinct impression that was a sincere prayer for strength."

"It was," Kasia said between gritted teeth. She was still covering her eyes.

"Okay, here's the story. Back in 1990, a pair of fossil-hunting brothers found a skull belonging to a t-rex on land that turned out to be the largest and best-preserved ever found. This is an important point, Miss Payne. It was just a big, nice-looking bone of a species of dinosaur we already knew about, okay?"

"Okay." She still didn't sound any happier, but at least she'd uncovered her eyes.

"Okay, so right away, there are some problems. The brothers found the skull on land owned by a rancher named Williams. Williams had invited the brothers onto his land to look for fossils, but of course, once he found out the magnitude of what the brothers found, he immediately retracted his invitation and tried to get more money. The brothers cut him a larger check and completed the

excavation, but the dispute with Williams had already attracted the attention of a nearby tribe of Indians, who promptly asserted that the land the skull had been found in actually belonged to them. The Indians, Williams, and the brothers all asked our good friends in the government to mediate the issue of who owned the skull."

Ez paused for dramatic effect, and Kasia, after feigning indifference for a second or two, finally broke and said, "Who'd they give it to?"

"They stole it for themselves," Ez said quietly. "Thirty-five federal agents, police, and National Guardsmen converged on the brothers' warehouse and took the skull. When one of the brothers asked for a badge number, he was told that if he did not cooperate, he would be, quote, thrown on the ground and arrested, end quote. The government sat on the skull for a few years and then auctioned it off for 8.4 million dollars, and that, Miss Payne, is why paleontologists have learned not to attract attention over custody disputes with their fossils."

Kasia nodded, her eyes narrow with indignation on the poor skull's behalf.

"Brimstone is going to do everything his oily little brain can think of to get his gloved mitts on that skull," Ez concluded. "But if he fails, it's going to end there. Likewise, if he succeeds in getting the thing away from me, the last thing I'm going to do is go crying off to Uncle Sam for help in getting it back. I would rather see that skull in a museum, even if it's not my museum, than see it in Sotheby's, being sold to some idiot who wants to turn into a computer mod or a ... bong, or whatever rich people do with priceless scientific

artifacts they don't need." He opened his mouth to continue down that vein, abruptly remembered where the conversation had started, and wrenched himself back to the salient point. "So from now on, shifts."

Kasia nodded again, but she was beginning to look a little distracted. "Have you ever thought of using Brimstone's evil enthusiasm to your own advantage?" she asked.

Ez studied her for a long time, trying to see where she was going with this. "What do you mean?"

"Well...." Kasia took a few overly-casual steps, scanning the horizon as a means of not meeting his eyes. "It occurs to me that sending Hugo a'courtin' has divested us of a golden opportunity to get inside the Doctor's head."

Ez frowned. "What exactly are you suggesting, Miss Payne?"

"I'm suggesting, Professor Esben, that I use my feminine wiles on the minion as a means of keeping Brimstone in check."

Ez caught Kasia by the arm and turned her bodily around to make her look at him. "I have a problem with that plan," he said evenly. "You see, I just can't shake myself of the niggling little notion that it's wrong to toy with a guy's heartstrings just to score points off the bad guy."

"Brimstone was going to do it first," Kasia argued.

"Two wrongs don't make a right, Miss Payne."

"Yeah, and two Wrights made an airplane, what's your point?" Kasia swiped her hair over one shoulder and visibly switched tracks. "Look, I'm not going to lead Hugo on. All I'm saying is, if the guy shows up again, maybe I could ask a few

pointed questions, is all. Brimstone seems to be the sort of ego-maniacal supervillain that blabs all his evil plans to every henchman in sight and Hugo doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who can keep a secret terribly well."

Ez gave her the full brunt of a dumbfounded expression. "You think Dr. Brimstone has *plans*?!"

She pursed her lips slightly. "Good point, chief. But, look, there's got to be some way we can use Hugo to our advantage." Kasia snapped her fingers and grinned suddenly. "I've got it! And it doesn't even involve lying." She thought about it and amended, "Exactly."

Ez released his hold on her and folded his arms, regarding her warily. "Okay, I'm listening, but I warn you, I am morally against the idea of 'using' another human being to anyone's advantage."

"Okay, here's the deal. We both know that it's only a matter of time before Brimstone makes a play for that skull, right?"

"Right."

"And the whole point of having his minions hit on me at all is so I'll help them steal it, right?"

"Right." He drummed the fingers of one hand on his biceps.

"So what if I did?" she said simply, raising one eyebrow.

Ez raised both of his. "I beg your pardon?"

"What if I—" Kasia began pacing again, rubbing her hands together as if the friction helped her plot. "What if I made a bunch of plaster jackets with nothing in them, and then

marked them up like they were the weird bones, and then *let* Brimstone steal them?"

Slowly, Ez's arms came uncrossed.

"Think about it," she urged. "Brimstone could think he had the bones, so he wouldn't be trying to steal them again, and he'd probably be so careful about keeping a low profile afterwards that we'd actually be able to get some work done. And we wouldn't have to lie about anything, or lead anyone on, or anything. We just leave the fake jackets out next to the trailer and make sure Hugo sees them, and they'll take care of all the dirty work. What do you say, sport? Is it a plan?"

Ez sank to the ground again, not laughing this time, but just so he could stare up at her with the reverence that plan deserved. "That," he said emphatically. "Is a great plan. In fact, let's do it right now, before your boyfriend gets back. But I have a few provisos, Miss Payne, and they are not negotiable. First—" He stood up swiftly and extended one finger as a visual aid while Kasia crossed her arms and looked long-suffering. "—under no circumstances are you to flirt with either minion. Unless, I guess, you find yourself swept off your feet and out of your mind by the relentless affections of a paid thug."

Kasia snorted.

Ez stuck out another finger. "And second, although we can make the fakes and leave the fakes lying around, under no circumstances are you to present the fakes as being the real bones, *nor* are you to arrange to help a minion to steal the fakes. That would be wrong."

Kasia sighed and shook her head, looking resigned.

"And finally, if, for whatever reason, this brilliant plan of yours does not work, under no circumstances are you to plunge headlong into a career of thwarting Brimstone with complicated schemes. We get right back to white-bread-style paleontology, got it?"

"Got it." She rolled her eyes. "You sure take all the fun out of thwarting. What's the point of even having an arch-nemesis?"

Ez didn't dignify that with an answer, and wouldn't have, even if he could have thought of one. "Since this is your plan, you can do all the back-breaking labor that goes along with making fake plaster-wrapped fossils. I'll finish up in Sara and start whatever's left in Rex. Remember that in addition to foiling nemeses and discovering new dinosaurs, we're still responsible for cleaning up all the fossils my students left behind."

"I know, I know." Kasia rolled her eyes, but did so grinning. "Gosh, it is so much fun thwarting supervillains. Help me mix up the plaster?"

"Sure." Ez took a step, then stopped, cutting his eyes back at his tent. "Having you around is starting to rub off on me, Miss Payne. I just got a tremendously groovy idea. Hang on."

It took less than a minute to jog over to his tent, rummage through the crates of his personal belongs, and return with the eight-inch pink plastic dinosaur his niece had given him for some long-past birthday. He held it out to Kasia, beaming.

"Thank you," she said, looking puzzled.

"It's not for you, it's for Brimstone's Steal-Me jackets." Ez could feel the warm glow of pure evil sitting cozily in his chest. He wondered if Brimstone felt like this every day. "My only regret is that I won't be there to see his face when he finds it."

\* \* \* \*

Wrapping non-existent bones was harder than Kasia thought it would be. She shouldn't be surprised by this, she supposed. After all, the operative word was 'wrapped', and when there was nothing actually there to undergo wrapping, the job was bound to develop a certain level of difficulty. After making several futile attempts to simply pile plaster and burlap together, Kasia was forced to find surrogate bones to fill her decoy jackets—rocks, dried chunks of cactus, a bag of empty pop cans, and yes, even Prof. Ez's plastic dinosaur.

The resultant lumps of drying plaster were disappointing to Kasia's senses. Even Brimstone's minions—who were not, in the kindest possible language, over-endowed with intelligence—could not fail to notice that the jackets were very light for their size. The only question was, would that fact deter them from stealing the things?

"How's it going?" Ez called.

Kasia wiped plaster onto the seat of her jeans and stood up, stretching out the cramps that had taken up residence in her spine. "It's going," she said grimly, giving her neat row of drying jackets one last scowl before putting them from her mind. "How's dinner coming along?"



"It's coming along," he replied, mimicking her tone exactly ... even drawing his brows down in a Ez-ish facsimile of her glare. The effect was laughable; even when he was scowling, his eyes were still happy and one rebellious corner of his mouth was still twitched up in half a grin. It made her think of the way he'd looked when she'd first laid eyes on him in Pop's, like a good-humored gypsy, roguish and sexy, and hoping to include her in the joke.

Kasia approached the camp fire, running these thoughts comfortably over in her mind, getting used to the idea of thinking about him as a good-looking man ... and as a man who thought she was pretty. It was an adjustment from thinking of him as just her boss, or worse, as the boss who spanked her, but one she thought she could eventually make. She made up her mind to tell him so, to let down the wall, or at least to take the razor wire off the top of it. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and said, "Chili-mac again?"

Dammit.

"Yes, chili-mac again. Always do what you're best at, Miss Payne." Ez gave the blackened cookpot a few more prissy stirs and then scooted back from the coals and patted the patch of desert beside him invitingly. "How's about a sit-down, pardner? Feels like I haven't seen you for days."

"You saw me this morning," she told him, hiding the butterflies inside her with a mask of indifference. She was going to do it. She was going to talk to him, share with him, let him in. Just as soon as she could think of something to say. "And you saw me last night, when you polished my back

fender, which ought to have been enough 'seeing me' to tide you over for quite some time."

Ez rocked back with a grin, clearly delighted at the turn of phrase. "Polished my back fender!" he crowed. "Why, that's splendid, Miss Payne! I'm adding that one to my big book of euphemisms! And see? You got your point across without even cussing just a little!"

The simple praise set her heart aglow, as corny a cliché as it was. "Truly a red letter day, Professor."

"Truly." He patted the place beside him again and this time, Kasia sat down. "Let's talk," he said cheerily. "I feel like being chatty."

Kasia regarded him with mild amazement. "As opposed to your usual taciturn self, I suppose?"

"Taciturn, ooo! Bringing out the big vocab guns, are we? Well, you might to remember that as a scientist, I know so many big Latin words, my mouth is registered as a lethal weapon."

"Or at least it will be after we eat this chili-mac."

"What can I say? Chili-mac is camping food." Ez smiled again, looking into the coals rather than at her. "My dad took me camping every year since I was three, and he always made chili-mac for dinner every night. That's how you know you're roughing it." He was quiet for a second or two, and then laughed a little. "Come to think of it, that was the only time he ever let me have soda pop or candy, either. He used to say that being out in the wilderness devolved Man, made it possible, nay, made it necessary to feed the primal, more amoral facets of our deeply-rooted drives. He was an

anthropologist," he added in an aside. "And a big fan of eating meat off a stick, stripping down to a loincloth, and painting on cave walls. There are cave walls all up and down Arizona with my dad's paintings all over them." He held up his hands to frame various parts of the sky. "Here is Man making fire, here is Man knapping flint, here is Man overwhelming a 1973 Ford truck...." He dropped his hands back into his lap and smiled, shaking his head. "Good times."

"Must have been an interesting childhood."

"You know, I never thought so at the time, but looking back, yeah. My dad was a little nuts." He leaned forward to poke at the bubbling food. "But he made a mean pot of chili-mac. And I think it's like me and being scared of babies—once the idea gets in there, it's hard to dig it out. I never eat this much soda pop and candy when I'm home."

"I wasn't aware we were eating a lot of soda pop and candy now," she countered.

Ez shrugged expansively. "We can't keep it at the site, obviously. Bugs. But I sure load up on the stuff every time I hit Pop's. Baby Ruths are my favorite, just in case you were hurting for birthday ideas." He lapsed into quiet for a minute, then laughed again. "When I was a kid, they had this great candy bar called a Cowboy Bob Bar, after the cartoon? You remember the...? Well, I guess you must have missed that one. Anyway, they made a candy bar. Coconut flakes rolled in caramel and damn near fossilized, and then dunked in chocolate and rubbed with peanuts. It was as big as my arm, I kid you not, and for 362 days out of the year, they were absolutely forbidden in my house, but when dad took me

camping, I not only got one, I got one every day! Those were the best candy bars in the world. They don't make 'em any more."

"Good things never last," Kasia said.

Ez looked at her, surprised. "Sure, they do."

She hadn't meant anything profound by it, just making conversation, but looking back at him, the meaning of her flip words were suddenly hammered home. "No," she said, her heart sinking. "No, they really don't. I'm not trying to be a downer here, it's just a fact. I don't even have to be talking about me. Look at you. You said yourself you never really get to know anybody, you just have this string of students and associates that come and go. You move around all over the world, but you never really get to settle in anywhere. I bet you don't even go camping anymore. I bet you just go to sites like these, where camping is work, and then when you're home, you just stay home and think fond thoughts about how camping used to be fun. You don't strip down to a loincloth and fingerprint on rocks."

"I do eat meat off a stick," he pointed out.

"Boss, all you eat is chili-mac, and you eat it out of a bowl!"

He opened his mouth, looked startled, and then closed it again without saying anything. After a moment, a relieved expression crossed his face, and he announced, "I had a cheeseburger just the other day, Miss Payne!"

"On a stick?"

"Well ... no." He frowned at her. "But it was still a good cheeseburger, and that's beside the point you're trying to

make anyway. I have fun, Miss Payne. I have fun all the time. Yes, the people that I know do tend to come and go, but we have good times. And no, I don't go camping in my spare time, but—"

Kasia shook her head. "Look, I'm not arguing. You're right, you have good times all the time, but they don't last." She pushed herself to her feet and started walking for her tent. "Good things never do. You just have to keep it in perspective, you know?"

"Now, wait a second!" There was a scraping sound as Ez got up to follow her, and she had to resist the urge to run. He caught her by the arm and turned her around, squinting into her eyes as though trying to bring her into focus from miles away. "Don't think I don't know what you're really talking about here! No, Cowboy Bob Bars aren't around anymore—the world has moved on and it's a tragic loss for all of us—but you can't use the inevitability of Change as an excuse to avoid life! You need to take a page from your own book, Miss Payne, keep it in perspective!"

Kasia's whole soul felt like it was shriveling up and dying inside her. She'd wanted to talk to this man! God help her, she'd been determined to flirt with him, and this was how she'd managed to mangle that lofty goal! Tears pricked at her eyes and she tugged at her arm. "I don't know what you're talking about! Now let go of me. I need to change my pants!"

She saw real irritation in easy-going Ez's eyes for the first time.

"Sometimes I think I really must be falling for you," he said in a low voice, almost as if he were talking to himself.

"Because I can't think of any other reason why you should be able to get under my skin like this. You are making me so frustrated right now I just don't know what to do with you."

It was the weirdest declaration of affection she'd ever heard, and she had no life experience to draw on fit to help her respond. "You can leave me alone!" she shot back despairingly. "That's all anyone can do!"

Ez's square jaw managed to square itself even further. "I think if you start down that road, I'm going to put you over my knee," he said, as calmly as if remarking on the weather.

Kasia lost the last shred of her ability to bite her tongue. "Good!" she snapped, her arms flapping at her sides as she shrugged wildly. "Great! That's your answer to everything! You probably think you could cure cancer with enough spankings! So go ahead, boss, spank me!" She could hear herself, but she wasn't really in control of what she was saying. She listened with a growing sense of horror and doom as the words poured out of her. "Spank me for swearing and spank me for being a rule-breaker and spank me for having no morals and no energy to pretend any different any more. Spank me so you can fool yourself into thinking you're saving me! Spank me! Maybe *this* will be the time it finally sinks in that some people can't be saved! Some people just aren't worth saving!"

He spun her around, putting himself on bended knee and hurling her over the top of it with considerable force. Her hands flew out to save herself from a fall that he had choreographed to stop well before she hit the ground, and her palms slapped into the sun-baked desert flats. The bilious

flood of words were cut off with brutal efficiency as her stomach met his stony thigh, but there was no relief in silence. She knew what was coming.

"Let me up!" she bellowed, kicking and beating her hands on the hard, hot ground.

His answer was to bring his hand down hard across the seat of her jeans, sending her forward with a whoosh of breath that had started out as fuel for a scream. She tried to buck backwards, but he planted his left arm in the small of her back and levered her down again. She could kick all she wanted, slap the desert all she wanted, but she wasn't getting away and she wasn't getting up. She was caught.

Ez didn't afford her anticipation for long. Hard and fast, his palm slapped the sand from the seat of her jeans with single-minded dedication. She tried to reach back, to put a wedge between the iron-hard flat hand of his and her already burning backside, but he caught her wrists easily and neatly shifted them into the grasp of the same arm that held her pinioned over his knee. She had nothing left to fight him with. Except her voice. And that she kept locked behind tightly-clenched teeth because the only words coming to mind right now were the four-lettered variety. No way in hell was she about to compound her error by earning a longer, harder, infinitely more painful session for swearing.

"I'm all done fighting with you," Ez told her as he spanked her, his hand clapping into her bottom with muted firecracker-sounding whacks that nevertheless had enough of a pop behind them to jolt her over his knee, knocking soft, breathy gasps and squeaks through her gritted teeth.

The heavy denim of her jeans should have been at least a partial barrier against the pain. It was rather a dismaying discovery to realize Ez didn't need to take her pants down in order to make it hurt. He set her bottom on fire pockets-first, working his way down to the faded off-colored seat of her jeans where hours of sitting on rocks had made them almost threadbare. By the time he had reached that magical spot of instant contrition, the crease where her bottom and thighs met, her squeaks had grown to full blown almost continuous squeals and her eyes were clenched just as tightly as her teeth.

"Stop!" she bellowed, feet digging a hole into the ground behind her.

Ez not only didn't stop, he spanked her harder, knocking all those useless tears she refused to cry right up onto the edge of her lashes.

Her voice cracked. "Stop!"

The fire and the pain he paddled into her bottom only proved to amplify the hurt already inside her. It didn't matter how hard she fought it, those rebel tears squeezed past her eyelids and spilled right off the end of her lashes, falling from her cheeks to the desert earth.

"St-top! Puh-please!" Kasia threw back her head, her fingers clawing at the air behind her, her toes wedged into little self-dug holes in the ground, giving her only an inch or two of leverage in which to rise as she burst into tears.

The sobs racked her. Between them and her choking pleas for him to stop, just stop, Kasia could barely breathe. She couldn't think at all. There was nothing beyond the fire and



the hurt and the raw, throbbing pain both inside and out. She couldn't even say just when exactly the spanking did stop, but she was still begging Ez to end it even when he picked her up, turning her to sit upon his knee despite the aching of her battered nethers.

His arms came tight around her, and for the first time in all her life, not only did Kasia let herself be held by him but she melted into his comforting embrace. His shirt soaked up her endless tears, his chest absorbed her racking sorrow, his arms pulled her so tightly close that it almost felt as if he would pull her into him.

"Now," his voice against her ear was warm and strong as the heat of his spanking hand, pressed against her side as he held her. "If you want to talk, Miss Payne, I'm more than willing to listen."

"W-why do you k-keep trying to change me?" she sobbed. "What difference w-will it make when you're gone? I can't be the g-girl you want me to be! Girls like t-that need to have clean clothes and h-houses and f-friends to make it work! *You're killing me!*" she brayed suddenly, and burst into fresh tears. "Why are showing me this ... this pretty mirror? I have to leave you! I'm going to Georgia and I'm going to work until my hands are bloody but I'll lose it all and I'll have to be ugly again and *I hate you!* I *hate* you for making me think I can be pretty!"

"Oh, Kass." She was fighting him now, but he ignored her struggles and pulled her even closer, rocking her in his embrace as though she were a very small child. "Kasia, don't do that. Don't give up on yourself like that. This country may

have its problems, but everyone gets a ticket here. Everyone gets a chance to move on. No one deserves to feel doomed like that. And I can help you. I can help you as much as you'll let me."

Kasia kept crying, not hard and not loud, but steady as rain. She hugged his neck and let her tears leak out over his shirt, aware only of the warmth and strength and sound of him, and of the echoing sting and burn of her spanking. It was the same thing, she thought disjointedly—they were all the physical realities of his affection.

Kasia had never felt like this before; she couldn't categorize him, couldn't relate this moment in time with the rest of her life's experiences. She'd been hit before, but this wasn't the same. This was about healing, not anger; about love, not hate. The only thing she could even begin to compare this to were the spankings she'd earned as a child in one of her foster homes, but even that was only half a truth. Back then, spankings had been pitiless, totalitarian punishments in which she had no argument or appeal and in which she was as likely to be spanked for something the "real" daughters had done (and blamed her for) as she was for any true infraction.

This was so much more than that. She believed—here in his arms with the blistering crimson shadow of the spanking still popping and scorching at her from behind—that she could be a better person. That he could help her. That he could love her.

And all she had to do was let him.

The terror of that truth was at last too much for her. Kasia pulled away, snuffling and wiping at her face to disguise the fear she felt hammering inside of her. "Your chili-mac is burning," she said, and when he twisted around to see, she walked away from him and sought the shelter of her empty tent.

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## Chapter Eight

The longest night of Kasia's life had been the first night she'd ever spent in a shelter. She'd forgotten which one. She'd even forgotten what city it had been in. She remembered that it was co-ed, and that the men slept two to a room in real, if small and none too new, beds upstairs, and that the women and children were locked in a gymnasium for the night. The gym had been lined with cots—to her eyes, hundreds of them—and despite the crowds of people bedding down there for the night, the room had caught every sound and thrown it down in raining echoes. Kasia, then just sixteen, had lain awake until light came through the high, dirty windows, terrified of every shuffling movement, every snore. And yes, someone had come to the gymnasium doors, not just once, but three times, to test the locks and peer in frustration at the women sleeping within.

That had been the very longest night, and the very worst. This night couldn't top it, because despite all Kasia's frustration and misery as she sat alone by the fire, she knew she was not in any danger. But it was still a bad night.

Ez, in all his masculine glory, had insisted on taking the first watch, which was pointless in Kasia's opinion. She'd only managed a few hours of sleep in fits and starts—every little movement had pulled and scraped at her tenderized bottom, bringing her out of dreamland, often on the verge of screaming. And with every rosy blush of heat she'd reawakened in her nethers, some ghost of Ez's voice had

piped up, reminding Kasia that the journey to betterment was hardest, but she didn't have to go it alone.

At 4 a.m., Ez had fetched her out to take her turn warding off potential henchmen, no doubt believing her to be well-rested and fit for sentry duty. From that point on, it wasn't just painful to sit around and not sleep, it was also boring. She spent a lot of time just poking at the fire and staring into the caverns of coals she created, listening to the Professor snore and wishing it could be a year later—wishing she was already in Georgia and well on the way to forgetting all about him. The thought was not soothing to her and she didn't want to think too much about why.

It was a lot of time to have nothing to do. A lot of time to just sit, to feel the slow burn of last night's spanking, and to keep hearing Ez's voice telling her he cared too much to just let her be.

She believed him. She wanted to because he was so nice and so good-looking, but she *had* to because ... well, because he spanked her. It should have been an outrageous contradiction, but it wasn't. The fact that he spanked her made his proclamation of affection undeniable. She couldn't understand it, but she couldn't keep fighting it, either. And she didn't want to. Alone in the absolute dark of pre-dawn in the desert, Kasia felt only a hollow longing for something—completeness, companionship ... something.

As soon as it began to get light, Kasia found busywork to occupy her hands and distract her mind. She made coffee. She topped off the generator, noting as she did so that the can was now almost empty. She sorted out her dirty clothes

and made her bed. She found a black marker and labeled the now-dried fake fossil jacket with "NEW SKULL" in letters two inches high so Rocky or Hugo could read them clearly. She even got the handcart out and moved plaster, burlap and all the digging tools down into Rex so that site could get finished today. After that, there was just nothing left to do.

As Kasia sat waiting for the smell of coffee to rouse her boss, she heard the weighty crunch of an approaching goon. She glanced around, somewhat depressed at just how excited the thought of company made her, and there was Hugo.

He'd tucked his shirt in, was again in a neck tie, and had slicked back his hair with a generous dollop of eye-wateringly scented pomade. His crudely-chiseled face betrayed no emotion whatsoever; he gazed at her with a complete, cow-like lack of thought and said, "Hey. I got a note."

"Good for you," Kasia said, knowing full well that *she* hadn't sent it.

But her simple acknowledgement was apparently all the permission Hugo needed to continue. He dug into his pocket and brought out a much-creased sheet of paper. He unfolded it laboriously, smoothing it straight between his sausage fingers, and then cleared his throat as he prepared to recite. His brows furrowed under the power of his concentration until his eyes were invisible, and he began to read.

"Good morning you look beautiful today," he said, all in one breath, and hammering the period onto the end of the sentence. Then he paused and looked up, studying her. "Ya do," he said thoughtfully. "I likes the way your boobs bring out the color of your eyes."

Kasia blinked and slowly lowered her mug of coffee to rest on her knee. The saddest part was, that wasn't even the worst compliment she'd ever received. "Thanks."

"Yeah, okay." Hugo raised his paper again, and once more, his forehead became an avalanche of comprehensive thought as he struggled with the note. "I must go to town on an errand for the brilliant and deb ... debone...."

"Debonair," Kasia said.

Hugo mouthed the word a few more times, then abandoned it and moved on. "The brilliant Dr. Brimstone." Hammer, went the period. "Would you care to accompany me my fair flower." Hugo lowered the paper and looked at Kasia expectantly. "It's like I'm askin' ya for a date," he explained. "Ya wanna? I promise I won't get fresh or nothin' unless you want."

He had to be kidding.

He wasn't.

Kasia began to wrack her brains for some way to gently turn a two thousand pound gorilla down, when the thought struck her that she had not gotten in to Pop's place for a shower and a turn at the washing machine since she'd been hired. And having just gone through her pack this morning, she knew full well that she was wearing her cleanest clothes, and they weren't all that clean to begin with.

Besides, she reasoned, Hugo was unlikely to get thuggish on her when he was so clearly on the prowl. And keeping him occupied was really her duty as Ez's assistant.

"Sure, big guy," she said, putting her empty mug aside. "Let me just tell the boss I'm leaving."

"Yeah, okay." Hugo began the long process of folding up his note, his square head reassuming the clayish complacency which was his usual expression.

Kasia crossed the camp to Ez's tent and unzipped it just enough to stick her head inside.

He was sprawled over his cot, one foot and both arms hanging out from his open sleeping bag, and his head underneath his pillow. His snores were muffled but still audible, and every breath fluttered the edges of his pillowcase.

'Good looking man,' thought Kasia, letting her eyes trail down from the snoring pillow, across the broad, tan chest steadily rising and falling, to the shadowed valley-and-hills of his stomach. The sleeping bag obscured further examination—just the waist of his shorts proudly proclaiming him to be a Hanes man, and a tiny tattoo of a T-Rex playing a steel guitar—and anyway, Hugo was waiting on her. Kasia reached in and pinched Ez's exposed big toe. "Hey, Professor."

"Unh." He pulled his foot back under the protection of the sleeping bag, but lifted the pillow off his face at the same time, thus preserving the sacred ratio of skin exposed to air. "Whazzit?"

"I'm leaving," she said. "You're on deck."

"Yeah, okay." He struggled into a sitting position, scratching at his beard and nodding several times. "Time?"

"Nine-ish. Is that okay?"

"Yeah." He gave a bone-cracking yawn and dropped back atop his pillow. "Yeah, that's fine. Be right out. You go on."



Kasia nodded and ducked out, zipping the tent closed behind her. She returned to Hugo, pausing only just long enough to collect her backpack from her own tent and the gas can from the trailer, and they walked together out of camp and down to the road where Brimstone's hearse was waiting.

Hugo, who was quite possibly the best-mannered minion Kasia had ever encountered, opened Kasia's door for her, then plucked the gas can and pack from her startled hands and loaded them up in the back of the hearse. "Watch ya hands," he said, and slammed her door. He lumbered around to the driver's side, settled himself behind the wheel (lowering the entire vehicle a good three inches in the process), gunned the engine, put his hands at ten and two exactly, and then carefully pulled out.

He drove exactly twenty feet before glancing at her, and then stomped on the brakes so hard, Kasia nearly whapped her head on the dashboard. "Buckle up," the minion growled, his massive brows drawing thunderously down.

Life with Ez was making a weird impression on Kasia's life. Just for an instant, she imagined herself upended over Hugo's knee. She went for her seat belt so fast, she gave herself a canvas burn.

Hugo's face smoothed out. He grunted, turned his attention back to the road, and continued to drive.

The ride down to Starvation was dead silent for the first twenty minutes. Kasia couldn't remember how long the drive was supposed to be—with Ez chattering away in her ear like a monkey the whole time, it hadn't seemed like very long at all—but Hugo's absolute and leaden silence was stifling. Her

eyes kept going to the clock, with an increasing sense of desperation, until finally she couldn't stand it anymore. She turned to him and said, "How are things going with you guys?"

"Dunno," Hugo said simply. "The Boss don't let us know too much. He just tells us, ya know, where to dig an' what to carry. Mostly I dig."

"Well," Kasia said lamely. "I bet you're a great digger."

"Thanks. I get the job done." Hugo drove for a few seconds more, and then, without warning, he suddenly pulled the hearse off onto the shoulder, put the car in park, and turned all the way around to look at Kasia. "I bet you're good at stuff, too," he said intently. "Not diggin'. Your hands is too little. But lots of other stuff. Like math."

Kasia, squeezed as far up against her door as she could get and slapping frantically but quietly around in search of the latch, gave him her broadest and most sincere smile.

"Thanks! I am! Got any long division that needs doing?"

Hugo thought about it. "Naw, I'm good." He turned back to the wheel, put the car back in gear, and returned to the road.

After that, Kasia forced herself to just sit there, say nothing, and avoid eye contact or anything else that might distract the driver.

When they reached the ramshackle collection of buildings that made up the town, Hugo pulled around to the back of Pop's parking lot and stopped the car in front of a weathered-looking shed. "Stay put," he said, when she started to unbuckle herself, and he got out and came around to open her door for her. "Okay," he said. "We're here."

"So what's the errand you had to run?" Kasia asked, retrieving her pack and the gas can from the back of the hearse.

She turned back around in time to watch Hugo's face smooth out in surprise.

"I ... do not know," he said wonderingly. And then frowned. "I think it's just chattin' you up." He glanced at her. "What are you gonna do?"

She held up the gas can. "Top this off," she said. "Grab a shower. Do my laundry. You know. Basic town stuff."

Hugo nodded, still frowning. "That ain't very romantic," he said.

"They don't exactly have a Drive-In or a nightclub around here," Kasia pointed out, and Hugo looked ponderously around at the empty parking lot, and the half-dozen buildings it served. "Besides, it's been almost a week. A shower and some clean clothes is the most wonderful thing I can imagine." She started to head towards the shower-shed, letting her eyes run absently over the bizarre collection of signs littering the doorway to Pop's Place, and then she stopped in her tracks.

Hugo, ever alert to a woman's changing moods, also paused in the act of plodding away and looked back at her. "Ya want a few bucks for shampoo and stuff?" he asked, already digging in his pocket.

"No, no. I don't want to take your money." Distractedly, Kasia went up to the door and opened it.

Pops was almost directly in front of her, shuffling the stock on the potato chip rack, but he was quick to greet her with all

the enthusiasm she remembered, even if he did look a little surprised to see who was keeping her company today.

"I was just going to use the shed," she explained, cocking a thumb in that direction, "but listen, you've got a sign out here that says you hand-dip ice cream bars here?"

"Yup, right here in the back," Pops said proudly, nodding to the tiny café at the rear of the store. "Dip my own candy, too. I could make you up something nice, if you've a mind for it, little miss."

Kasia did a quick mental count of her finances. "Not for me," she said reluctantly, dimly aware that Hugo had come up behind her and was now breathing rather heavily on the back of her neck. "But ... have you ever heard of a Cowboy Bob Bar?"

"Sure."

To Kasia's surprise, it was Hugo, not Pops, who'd answered. She turned around, taking the opportunity to back up a little, and Hugo leaned against the doorjamb and looked placidly down at her.

"They was from that cartoon show," he said. "My brother liked 'em. I couldn't have any 'cuz nuts'd kill me, but Gage ate 'em all the time. Use to tease me, eatin' 'em right in front of me." Hugo cracked the knuckles on one hand. "Use to."

"You're allergic to nuts?" Kasia asked. It was hard to think of hulking Hugo as having any physical weaknesses.

No doubt he sensed that. His cheeks pinkened slightly and he dropped his eyes, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Yeah, but only the peanut kind, not, like, crazy guys. I get along with them just fine."

"Oh. Oh good," Kasia said lamely, and then made herself look at Pops again. "Do you think you can fudge one up for me if he describes it to you?" she asked.

"Could do," Pops allowed, giving Hugo the hairy eyeball.

"Thanks. And thanks to you, too, big guy," she added, giving Hugo a friendly slap on the arm as she squeezed past him again. She went back out across the lot to the showers, thinking of Professor Ez, thinking, 'Today, for sure. Today, I'll let him be my friend.'

\* \* \* \*

If Brimstone's unmistakable hearse hadn't chosen that exact moment to grind up over the ridge and park itself at the edge of camp, Ez would have thrown in the mental towel and gone out over the desert to confront the good doctor. Cotterpins and trowels and the like were one thing. Kidnapping was something else entirely. The sort of something that, new bones or no new bones, a fella was inclined to involve the police in.

But the hearse *did* pick that moment to drive up, and so Ez waited, poised for anything, as Hugo unfolded himself from the car, lumbered around to the passenger-side door, and opened it for Ez's wayward assistant.

The sight of her—although not entirely unexpected—had a galvanizing effect on him. Ez sprang forward, bellowing, "*Where have you been?*" at a volume he had never before heard issue from himself without the aid of a microphone.

Kasia, one hand still on the hearse's door and the other clutching her backpack, actually looked surprised. "I told you," she stammered, "I went to town."

"You told me you were *leaving*!" Ez thundered. "I thought you went to the biffy! You've been gone for three hours!"

Kasia's jaw dropped. "I have?! Gosh, boss, I am so sorry! I thought I said 'town', and I never meant to be gone so long! I." She stumbled to a stop, looked around at Hugo (still solicitously holding her door open) and said, "Thanks for the ride, big guy. You're dismissed."

"Yeah, okay." Hugo shut the door and went placidly back around to slide behind the wheel.

"I'm sorry," Kasia said again when the hearse rolled away. "He dropped by earlier and offered me a ride to town. I missed out on my last shower and ... and I didn't mean to scare you."

She looked so thoroughly miserable that Ez could feel his anger evaporating. "Next time," he grumbled, "take an extra second and make sure you tell me *where* you're going, too."

She nodded, her arms wrapped around her backpack like it was the world's ugliest, lumpiest teddy bear. She wouldn't meet his eyes, and Ez began to feel a little ogrish.

"I may have over-reacted," he said, and offered his hand as an overture of peace.

To his utter astonishment, she put her backpack in it. From the brave set of her jaw, one might have thought she was giving him the crown jewels, and in a way, Ez realized she probably was.

"Maybe you did," she said. "But not by much. I really, truly didn't mean to scare you, but I was careless. You'd be within your rights to give me a good dusting."

Ez stepped back and squinted at her. "Okay, now I get it," he said. "You really were kidnapped, and Brimstone replaced you with an android."

Kasia didn't even crack a smile. She looked at his shoes but not at him, and made several false starts before finally saying, "I never knew anyone who really cared about me enough to ... do what you do. People are always doing too little ... or too much, or for all the wrong reasons." She raised her eyes enough to see her backpack in his grip. "Sometimes I feel like I'm spinning out of control," she said. "Like there's no guardrail and no speedbumps ... no white lines to even tell me where the road is. Like ... like I need to crash just to know where I am."

She dragged her eyes up to his at last. They were still dry, but bright. Too bright. "I don't want to be like this. I want to be a real person again. And Ez ... even if nothing else happens ... you know." Her cheeks flamed slowly with scarlet. "You helped. That's all I'm trying to say. You helped."

He couldn't think of anything to say to that.

Kasia blew out a deep breath and grinned, as if she'd come to the end of a hard race and finally finished—not first, maybe, but still finished. She said, "Anyway, I brought you a present."

"You did?"

Kasia took her backpack out of his hands and unzipped one of the pouches. She removed a white paper bag, its top flaps

neatly folded and secured with a strip of tape, and handed it to him.

Ez forgot all about how he'd spent the morning wondering if Kasia had been dragged off to Brimstone's camp and forced to swear allegiance to Evil while dangling upside down over a vat of live eels. He gave the bag a good shake to determine that it was, in fact, a single object of some substance, and then ripped it open and looked inside.

For an instant, he was knocked completely off his pins. Not just speechless, but utterly without thought as well.

"It's a Cowboy Bob Bar," Kasia explained. She looked a little nervous. "Or as near as Pops could make it. I hope it's good."

"Of course it's going to be good," Ez said, somewhat hoarsely. He reached in and brought the candy bar out with a care that bordered on reverence. "If I had any manners, I'd be saying something like, 'Aw, you shouldn't have!'", but I don't, so thanks, Kass. From the bottom of my stomach. Thanks."

"Can I have some, too?" Kasia asked, just as Ez was preparing for his first bite. "I've never had a Cowboy Bob Bar."

"Next time I go to town, I will buy you a dozen," he promised. "But this one is mine."

"Aw, come on, please?" Kasia batted her eyes at him. "I'll give you a dollar!"

"No."

"I'll be your best friend!"



"I will not be bribed!" he declared staunchly. "This is my first Cowboy Bob Bar in more than ten years and I mean to eat the living heck out of it."

Kasia turned from plaintive to crafty in a split second. "I'll let you look in my pack."

Ez paused, the candy halfway to his mouth. He considered the boundless gastronomic delights of a Cowboy Bob Bar vs. the Great Unknown of Miss Payne's backpack. Slowly, curiosity put craving into a headlock. He pulled the candy bar into two more-or-less even pieces and held one out. The remaining piece wasn't even a proper mouthful, but it was a not-mouthful of the sweetest, most orgasmic time-traveling confectionary ever devised by Man and re-invented by Pops.

Kasia seemed to be savoring her morsel as much as he. She even licked the coconut flakes and melted stripes of chocolate from her palms.

"Okay, now give," Ez ordered when she had completed her kittenish grooming.

Kasia chased down a last errant flake from her chest and then waved him over to the campsite, where she sat Indian-style with her backpack in her arms. For a minute or two, that was all. They just sat together, and she looked at him nervously.

"I've never let anyone else see this stuff," she said at last.

"I won't break anything," Ez promised.

The corner of Kasia's mouth turned up. "Actually, I was going to say, 'Don't laugh', but don't break anything either." She held out the pack to him, and forced a smile when he took it.

Ez didn't know what to expect, but he handled the worn leather pack as though it contained a set of china teacups. It wasn't all that heavy, and it didn't rattle around too much, but nevertheless, Ez made sure he treated each item with care as he brought them out.

In the smaller of the pack's two compartments, Ez found Kasia's clothes, fresh from Pop's laundry shed. Two t-shirts, a threadbare sweater, the tank top she used for pyjamas, and three pairs of panties, each more bedraggled than the last. Her spare pair of jeans was rolled protectively around a jelly jar filled with sand. Ez held it up, shook it lightly, and looked at Kasia inquiringly. "Georgia?"

She nodded with half a sad smile. "You can open it if you want," she said. "It still smells like the sea."

"Aw, I'm not going to let the smell out." Ez rolled the jar back up and set it aside before continuing his excavation.

He found a single tube sock, knotted at the top, carrying what felt like a little folding money and a few handfuls of coins, and set it aside. There was a tattered canvas wallet, holding a social security card, several business cards with phone numbers inked on them, and a California State ID card, with an unsmiling Miss Payne looking out from its corner. There were two cans of heat-and-eat chili with pull-tab tops, a half-dozen packets of ketchup, and a little bag of peppermints, half-gone. Last of all was a children's book, much-read but well-preserved: *The Werpuppy*, by K. Alley Smith.

Ez pulled the book out and opened it to the title page. There, he found a photograph tucked safely inside.

It was a Polaroid, taken at a party, of a woman sitting on a man's lap. The man was waving at someone off to the side; his arm completely obscured his face, leaving only a head of dirty blonde hair to suggest his features. The woman was grinning at the camera with a glass-eyed openness that made Ez doubt that the beer she was holding in her hand was her first of the evening. The woman didn't look any older than Kasia did now, but she had that hard-partying haggardness that made her seem middle-aged nonetheless.

"Your mom?" Ez asked.

"Yeah. And my dad." Kasia gently took the photo from him and looked at it, her smile crooked and bittersweet. "You know, this one time ... I guess I was maybe seven ... I was staying with this family in this unbelievably isolated little stretch of nowhere. Anyway. This family would give me a penny for doing little things around the house, sometimes a nickel, and for weeks, for months, I saved them all up and asked to do more. They must have thought ... I don't know what they thought. But when I finally asked to go to town, they dropped everything and took me." Kasia shook her head slowly. "I asked to go to Walgreens, and I took this—" She held up the photo, and then took *The Werpuppy* back from Ez. "—to the photo center in the back of the store. I gave the lady behind the counter all my chore-money and asked her to use her computers to move my dad's arm so I could see what he looked like."

Kasia tucked the photo back into the title page, turned to the back of the book, and brought out another. She handed it

over, saying, "She had this for me when I got back. Cost me all of forty-three cents."

It was a head and shoulder shot of a handsome man in his mid-twenties. He was smiling, relaxed, a glint of good humor in his eyes, and if you weren't looking too close, or if you weren't seven years old, you wouldn't even notice that the shadows on his face didn't quite match the angles of the shadows in the rest of the room.

"It was years before I realized what she'd done," Kasia continued, still with that haunting smile. "She must have just pulled some guy's picture out of some file or, I don't know, out of her own wallet for all I know. Scanned it, cropped it, cut and paste. Pretty good job, huh?"

"Yeah."

"When I realized, you know what I thought?" Kasia took the picture back and returned it to the safety of her book. "I thought it was the nicest thing anyone ever did for me. Ever. I treasured this thing for five years because I thought it was really my father. But I've kept it ever since because of that lady, that lady who tried so hard to do a decent thing for a fatherless girl."

Kasia took the pack out of Ez's hands but didn't put the book away. Instead, she unzipped the other pouches and began to take more things out. "This is Captain Jackdaw," she said, holding up a plastic action figure. "Another mom went out to three different malls on Christmas Eve to buy one because she heard me whisper up the fireplace that I wanted one. And this—" She reached into the pack for yet another treasure. "—is my Little Mermaid coloring book. It was the

first movie I ever saw. My own mom gave it to me on a visitation, but I think my social worker actually bought it. Here is a spider—" A tiny Christmas ornament, made of twists of wire and glass beads, dangled from her finger. "—which a friend of mine made for me in Seattle. He had hundreds of them on his Christmas tree. He made the beads himself. I haven't seen him in years." She set the ornament aside and brought out a frayed dog collar, washed out to gray from its original blue. "Powder," she said. She ran her thumb over the tarnished tag and then put it away again.

"The longer I live like this, the easier it is to understand all those old bag ladies you see, pushing their carts full of the most random junk. I mean, this stuff ... it's all junk." She started packing things away again, slowly, reverently. The first tear slipped down her cheek and dripped off her chin, but it was alone. "But it's meaningful junk, all of it. And ... and sooner or later, you just hit the point where you need something to give you meaning. And these were good days."

She looked up at him, smiling with that tear track still wet on her cheek and the copy of *The Werpuppy* in her hands. "These were all my good days."

Impulsively, Ez dug into his pocket and brought out his keys. He unclipped one of many, many decorative keychains—a shard of brown bone floating in a sea of Lucite—and handed it to her.

"What is this?" Kasia asked, amused.

"First fossil I ever found," he answered. "Chunk of crocodile. Utterly without scientific value."

She kept looking at the keychain, not at him. "Why?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"Today was a good day, too." Ez brushed a few strands of blonde hair away from her tear-stained cheek, but she continued to avoid his eyes. He got up, wishing he had the nerve to say something else, something magical that would let her know everything he was feeling. But those words escaped him, as they did so often these days. In the end, he knew the best thing he could do for her now was give her privacy. He rested his hand briefly on her shoulder, and then he went back to work.

\* \* \* \*

Kasia watched her fingers close around the keychain as though it were something she was watching on T.V. "A very good day," she whispered.

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## Chapter Nine

"Miss Payne!"

Kasia's eyes flashed open before sleep fully left her brain. For a second or two, she had no idea where she was. She'd been dreaming about Georgia again. Not the usual dream though—the one where she was there on the beach, lying in the sand and watching a house being built, knowing it was hers. Or even the other dream, the one where the house was burning.

No, in this new dream, she had been building a boat. Not building it, exactly, but excavating it, pulling it piece by piece from the sand. And when it was finally all together, she knew that she would sail away forever. It didn't even seem like such a bad thing. It was only the ending, a good ending, of a thing whose time was finally past.

"Miss Payne!"

And that was Ez again, bellowing at her from somewhere underground. It was still light out and everything. How did he expect her to stay up for her shift of potential Brimstone-thwarting when she didn't get enough sleep?

"I'm up, I'm up!" she called, kicking off her sleeping bag. It sounded pretty urgent. She wondered idly what was wrong. A cold possibility suddenly occurred to her, and Kasia sprinted from the tent, shouting, "Is it gone? Did he take it? How did he get to it? We were so careful!"

"He didn't take it, Miss Payne." Ez's head appeared under the flap of Bobasaur's tarp. His eyes were round with shock,

but it wasn't a scary shock. More of a rueful, amused, irritated sort of shock—the expressional equivalent of liver-strawberry-and-pickle ice cream to Kasia's way of thinking. "You need to see this," the Professor said seriously, and ducked back down again.

Kasia stood for a moment, her body still tingling with adrenaline and her brain still clogged with sleep. At last, curiosity got hold of her internal controls. She stepped into a pair of jeans, zipped up her tent, and went down in the Bob to see what was up.

Ez was at the far end, holding the strange skull in his hands. "I couldn't help myself," he said, not sounding the least bit apologetic. "I had to take it out."

"Okay," she said, wondering if this was what he wanted her to see. Taking out fossils was his job. She'd pin a medal on him if she had to, but she'd really rather be asleep.

Ez smiled a particularly dry smile and turned around. He put the skull and its jawbone down on a bag of plaster and then pointed at the hollow depression where the bones had so recently lain. "Look at this."

Kasia came forward obediently, tilting the lamp affixed overhead so that she could see into the shadowed hole. "What am I looking at?" she began, and then saw it.

A knob. That was all. A lump, smooth and round, nearly the same color as the brown earth that enveloped it.

"It's another bone," she whispered, scarcely aware she spoke at all.



"I'll do you one better," Ez said. "It's a vertebrae. It's the vertebrae, moreover, that attaches to the base of the skull. Miss Payne..."

She looked at him, feeling the start of a grin stretching her numb lips.

Ez sighed, rubbing his hand through his shaggy hair, and finally tipped a lopsided grin back at her. "I think the whole skeleton is in there," he finished.

"I knew it!" Kasia gave a whoop and begin to hop excitedly, if awkwardly, around the tight confines of the dig, pumping her arms at the tarp-covered ceiling.

"Yep. Figures. Biggest find of my career and it's yours." Ez gave her a clap to the shoulder, stilling her celebrations. "You can go back to bed," he said. "I just wanted you to see it before I covered it up."

"Covered it—? Aren't we going to take it out?"

"This is too big for the two of us," Ez said simply. "I'm going to put a face on the wall, put in a call to BYU, and leave it for them. They'll have a full team back here in a few days, I'm sure, and if I'm lucky, I'll be heading it." The smile suddenly faded from the Professor's face and he looked at her as though he'd never seen her before. "And you'll be on your way to Georgia," he added, almost as if he were surprised.

Enthusiasm dropped out of Kasia like a stone. She looked back at that knob of bone, still buried in the Utah rock, and told herself it was the bone she wanted to stay for. She didn't believe it. She didn't even want to try and believe such a foolish thing.

"You okay?" Ez sounded concerned. Sweet guy.

Kasia looked back at him and made herself smile. "Yeah, just sleepy."

"Sorry." Ez waved her back, one hand over his heart in mute apology for waking her at all. "Go on back to bed. I'll wrap up your skull bones and cover the wall. Wake you around nine-ish."

Was that it?

Did there need to be anything more?

Kasia turned back toward the stairs.

"Miss Payne?"

She glanced back, one hand pressed to her stomach as though she could physically quiet the little flutters that had stirred up at the sound of his voice.

"You've done really good work here," Ez told her seriously. "I'd work with you anytime."

Work.

Kasia nodded, forced another smile, and went back to bed. This time, she didn't dream.

\* \* \* \*

Sitting up the second night was easier. Maybe it was the lack of guilt and frustration pressing in on her heart, or the glow of resolve that came from finally opening up to the guy. Maybe it was as simple as just getting some real sleep before her shift started or, even simpler, not having to sit on a newly-spanked bottom. Best yet, it could be that just knowing there were more funny bones hiding in the rock now that the skull had been removed gave Kasia enough of a squirrelly little thrill that even crap detail like this couldn't be all bad.

Which wasn't to say that it wasn't just as boring as it had been the night before, just that she couldn't distract herself by moping around for a few hours.

There wasn't really anything for her to do, either. Ez had brought out more than enough firewood to last her through the night, and he'd gone to sleep, so she couldn't repack the trailer or anything noisy. The dishes were clean, the site was locked down for the night, and all of Professor Ez's paleontology magazines were in his tent so she couldn't read them even if they were comprehensible, which they weren't.

The grey fingers of pre-dawn finally feeling up the sky came as a huge relief—an excuse to get up and *do* something! Kasia started with coffee, and when that was boiling away, brought out the snake oil for a spin around camp. With the reptiles thoroughly fended off for another day, it was time to bring out plaster and burlap and get everything ready down in Rex for what might prove to be the last day of fossil extraction. If not today, then tomorrow for sure. And then....

And then....

And then she was done here. Ez would probably go down to town today and arrange for another team to come out and take care of whatever mystery bones were still lurking in the ground where the skull had been found, and as soon as they arrived, she'd be cut loose with her eighteen hundred bucks and her bus ticket to Georgia.

Well, maybe not. She'd found the skull, after all. Maybe if she asked, Ez would let her stay until all the bones were out.

She didn't even care so much about getting paid for her time as long as she got to be in on that.

Well, okay, but then what? With a full team working on the excavation, there might be enough work for a whole week, but that was being pretty generous. And once it was done, she'd still be cut loose and he'd still be driving off to the next big dig and the next assistant. And what then?

Did she love him? She couldn't love him, she barely knew him. But she liked him. In spite of his spank-happy habits (or maybe even because of ... no, no, she couldn't admit to that, not even to the silent audience of her own mind), she liked him a lot. And he liked her. That had to count for something, didn't it?

She couldn't think about this. Not now. Not ever. Kasia shut off her internal debate and made herself focus on the more tangible matter of topping off the generator for another full day of fossil extraction in the musty dark.

She went into the trailer, but the red gas can wasn't in its usual place. Frowning, Kasia stepped back and tried to remember where she'd put it after Hugo brought her back from Starvation the day before. With sinking heart, she realized she had no such memory. She could clearly recall taking it with her to town, and she remembered watching Hugo fill it up at the pumps with the lumbering solicitousness of a goon gone a'courting, but she couldn't remember getting it back from him when she came back to camp. She thought she could remember Hugo loading it into the hearse ... but she'd been counting out coins as payment for Ez's candy bar at the time, and she couldn't even be sure of that.

Kasia made three more sweeps through camp—each more ridiculously thorough than the last—and finally was left with the inescapable conclusion that, wherever the gas can might be, it wasn't here.

She stood outside Ez's tent for a long time, trying to work up the nerve to tell him. Her eyes were fixed on the tent wall, looking right through it to the cot where Ez was sleeping. Her hands knotted at her waist, unthinkingly mirroring the clutch and roll of her stomach at this moment. Every so often, she'd catch herself reaching around in a pre-emptive rub at a bottom she was sure was about to be well-spanked.

Ez's snores hitched and stopped. After a second or two, his sleep-fuzzed voice called out, "Are you ... staring at me?"

"Yes," Kasia said helplessly.

The nylon rustle of a sleeping bag gave way to padding footsteps and then the tent unzipped part-way and one gypsy-black eye peered out at her in bewilderment. "Why?" he asked. "Is something on fire?"

"Not yet." Kasia's buttocks clenched. "Promise you won't get mad."

Ez's brows rose. "No way am I making that promise, Miss Payne, but I will promise not to throw things at you. What's wrong?"

Kasia forced her hands to her sides, took a deep breath, and said, "I lost the gas can."

Silence.

Ez pulled his head back inside his tent, fumbled around for a few seconds, and then emerged all the way, wearing pants. "Go on," he said with a dangerous sort of calm.

"I took it to town with me yesterday to get it filled up. Now I'm not sure if I left it at Pop's, or if I maybe left it in Brimstone's car."

Ez winced hard and smacked himself in the forehead. "Let's hope not, because if you did that, it's gone. Plus, he's probably bought up every other gas can between here and Bountiful." He rubbed vigorously at his eyes while Kasia stood miserably before him and at last sighed. "Well, the good news is, nothing that runs off the generator is absolutely essential, it just feels that way. We've got some battery-powered lamps and flashlights in the trailer, we can mix our plaster by hand, and we'll just have to make do without fans. It's not as hot as it used to be anyway. That's the good news." He looked at her, one eyebrow archly raised. "Can you guess what the bad news is?"

Kasia heaved an unhappy sigh, dropping her gaze. "I didn't mean to do it."

"I know."

"I only took it in the first place because it needed to be filled and I was trying to save you the trip."

"So noted."

"Don't I get any points for telling you as soon as I realized what I'd done?" she asked desperately.

"Sure, why not? I'll only give you nine minutes instead of ten." The words were flip enough, but his tone wasn't teasing. He caught her chin and forced her to meet his serious gaze. "Yesterday's trip to town," he said quietly, "was a shining example of complete, unthinking carelessness. I know you didn't mean it, and I know I was ready to let it go until this

happened, but this is the topper, Miss Payne. You're going to be spanked."

All of Kasia's instincts urged her to argue and she could see that Ez expected her to do exactly that, but she already knew she wouldn't. Whatever tenuous friendship she'd made between them, she'd fought for, harder than he would ever know, as much as he might think he did. She couldn't risk destroying it all for the sake of her pride. There were times, more than she cared to think about, when pride had been her most precious possession of all, but in the extremely short time since coming to Utah, Kasia had come to understand that in the face of one good man, pride was a tarnished coin. Trust was worth far more, and she had to trust Ez now.

"I still have that Get Out Of Spanking Free card," she said, talking more to herself than to him.

"Yes, you do."

He'd let her use it, too, and that would be the end of it. But Kasia wasn't going to use any more than she was going to argue. Like the true value of pride, certain truths had been revealed to her, and she knew that just getting out of a spanking couldn't feel as good as getting through one. And at the end of all arguments, there was one simple fact: She had done wrong, and she wanted to be forgiven.

Kasia turned away and went to lay herself across the generator. She pushed her jeans down without waiting to be told and then stepped all the way out of them, shivering a little with the awful anticipation of it. She could hear Ez coming for her, his bare feet scarcely even whispering as they moved over the hardpan and sand. She could hear lots of

things, for that matter; all her senses seemed sharpened to a razor's edge. She could even hear it when Ez pulled back his arm and swung.

CRACK!

As much as she was expecting it, the blow was still shocking. Kasia jumped forward, her hips jutting hard against the generator, but then she forced herself to push back, thrusting her buttocks out for punishment and making herself relax.

"Good girl," Ez murmured, and Kasia felt an unmistakable glow of pleasure at this praise.

CRACK-CRACK! His hand clapped down over each buttock in rapid turn, quickly covering her entire bottom with fire. Kasia's breath broke into harsh pants; her hands clawed at the generator in an effort to keep from clenching, but the pain had to have some outlet and it came with streams of silent tears.

She was only vaguely aware of them, even though she would have considered them an unforgivable weakness only a short time ago. Right now, the spanking stole all her attention, all her ability to think or feel. One minute. Two. Ten or twenty or fifty, perhaps, it all became one single stretch of time. Each new thunderclap smashed sensation away and then replaced it with new heat, a new agony of scorching fury, and a new challenge to her resolve of obedience.

The onslaught was relentless, but somehow entirely separate from the man who was administering it. She suffered, but not because of anything he was doing. She could think only of what she'd done—her thoughtlessness, her



carelessness—and each fresh slap of Professor Esben's hand only made the consequences clearer, helping her to own them more, one blistering blow at a time.

"Okay," said Ez, and there was one final CRACK before he stepped away. "Don't rub," he added, as Kasia's hands flew backward. "This is only half-time."

Kasia dropped her full weight onto the generator, turning her cheek into the cool, uneven metal and groaned as she forced her hands back to her sides. Her entire south end was on fire. She imagined she could feel it burning even hotter where the sunlight struck it, and she knew she wasn't imagining the shivery little slice of hell when the little breeze that blew over the desert brushed against her. All she could was kick her feet a little, a very little, and wait for the awful pins-and-needles stinging to die away.

"Think you can move?" Ez asked. He even managed to sound sympathetic.

Kasia thought about it, and finally nodded.

"Good. Go on into my tent and find the paddle I used on you that one time ... the Night of the Scorpion. Do you remember?"

Kasia shuddered, her face puckering, but nodded again. She dragged herself upright, locking her teeth against the cries that wanted to spring free at even the tiniest movement. How could it possibly hurt her bottom so much just to move her *arms*, for Pete's sake?!

"You're on your honor not to rub," Ez called after her, and Kasia nodded a third time, still too strained to speak aloud.

The paddle was back in the crate at the foot of the Professor's cot, again half-buried in the flotsam and jetsam of his life. She bent with the care of a much older woman than she was and collected it with only a resigned sort of sigh, and even though the tent flaps pretty much obscured her from detection, she didn't rub. She was on her word of honor, after all.

It wasn't until she was putting the paddle into Ez's hand that her calm broke. "I've learned my lesson," she heard herself say shakily. "I really have. Can't we just be done now?"

"Not yet." His tone was kind, his expression mild, but there was iron in the man nonetheless. "Take your panties off, please, Miss Payne. Or at least roll them down, if that makes you too uncomfortable. This paddling is going to be on the bare."

Kasia locked up.

For a long stretch of silent time, she only stood there, leaning with both hands braced against the generator, her head down, taking deep, slow breaths. From the outside, she looked like a woman who is considering a particularly thorny matter, but on the inside, there was a perfect stillness of non-thought. There was no turmoil, no inner debate. There was only pride and trust, and Kasia between them, waiting patiently to see who would win out.

At last, she bent woodenly and pushed her panties down.

"You're being very brave," she heard Ez say. "And I'm not going to make you count what's coming, but I am going to ask you to tell me why you think you're getting spanked."

There were a thousand ways to answer that, ranging from the unprintable all the way up to, 'Because you're the boss and that's the way you want it,' but in the end, Kasia went with the truth. "Because I was not being responsible."

"Are you ready?"

She nodded, and when nothing happened, she said, "Yes."

WHACK!

She hadn't thought the threadbare cotton of her worn panties had provided any protection until the moment when the paddle struck her bare flesh. Likewise, the pain of the hand-spanking hadn't seemed to have died down at all until that first smack woke her up to fresh hurt. Kasia cried out, her nerve and her resolve splintering, and stomped her feet in a desperate (and entirely futile) effort to shake off the pain of it. Her movements weren't struggles, weren't intended to evade, and the paddle had no problem homing in on her again and again.

Finally, at the most unlooked-for moment, it ended. Kasia fell forward, gasping, as the hue and crack of the spanks was replaced by an inferno of hornet-like stinging. This was the worst part, but it was now that Kasia's tears slackened. She had made it through, she had put paid to everything, and although the consequences may linger if they couldn't get their hands on another gas can, the wrongdoing itself was now wiped free.

"Thank you," she said, still sobbing. Just what she was thanking him for was a mystery—for the spanking, for caring enough to even give it to her ... for being there afterwards,

perhaps. Whatever the case, her thanks, although virtually unintelligible, was heartfelt and sincere.

She felt Ez's laughter even before she heard it and his arms squeezed her just a little tighter. "You know, I am getting just awfully fond of you, Miss Payne," he said. "If you don't watch out, you're going to make me do something completely unprofessional."

"Sorry," Kasia sniffled. She reached back to risk a rub at her throbbing bottom. "Life's tough all over, isn't it?"

"It is for some. And on a related note—" Ez put her at arm's length and then fished the keys to the truck out of his pocket. "I'd better go in to town and see if I can't find our missing gas can, or failing that, see if I can't get us another one. While I'm there, I can give the ol' Alma Mater a buzz and tell them about your great discovery."

"Right." Kasia tugged her jeans up with a muffled whimper and rubbed again, harder this time. The burn wasn't any better than the sting; why did she always have to rub? "I really am sorry," she said.

Ez smiled at her, one foot inside the truck, ready to hoist himself up and be gone. "I know you are, and it's all done now. To quote the vernacular, 'P-shaw'. And if worse comes to worse and we really can't get our mitts on another gas can, well, I've dug up bones in worse conditions. Why, back in Kazakhstan—"

"Well, daylight's wasting, I better get to work!" Kasia announced loudly, still swiping tears from her cheeks. She hobbled rapidly away from the impending (and unending) story and sought the relative safety of the Rex dig site.

\* \* \* \*

"It's not like it's a *bad* story," Ez muttered as he drove down the slope to the dusty road. "And it's not like it's a terribly *long* story, really. I've never had trouble spitting it out before. I just don't know what the problem is."

The truck did not reply.

"It's a good story," Ez announced. "Total gut-buster at every party I've ever been to. All three of 'em. People laugh and laugh. And they laugh because I tell it so well. It's Miss Payne that's the problem. Her and her total lack of a sense of humor. She's cursing me."

The truck acknowledged as that might be so.

"And the worst part is, by now no punch line in the world is going to make the wait worth it," Ez mused. "It's been built up too much. I mean, unless I have aliens beaming down from the Goodyear Blimp carrying a cure for cancer and a case of Blue Heron beer, I'm toast. She'll just look at me, with those big eyes of hers, and she'll say, *holy crap!*"

Ez's be-sneakered foot stomped hard on the truck's brake and he yanked the wheel hard to the left as Dr. Damien Brimstone very unexpectedly leapt out from behind the 'Private Land: No Trespassing' sign and tried to get his stupid self run over.

The tires did not spin out of control, the brakes had been fairly recently serviced, and the truck came to a halt without hitting anything. Ez leaned his head against the steering wheel, listening to the faithful engine chug roughly in time with the hammering of his heart, and when he thought he

had achieved a modicum of control over his more murderous impulses, he turned the truck off and got out of the car.

Brimstone smirked at him, twirling his mustache and pretending to be utterly absorbed in the study of the chunk of amber set in the head of his cane. "Ah, good day to you, my dear Pr—"

Ez snatched the cane out of Brimstone's hand and thokked him soundly on the head with it. "You moron!"

"Ow! Hey!" Brimstone stumbled backwards, hands flailing to protect his head, succeeding only in knocking his own hat off.

Ez gave him a knock to the forehead, not a hard one, pretending Brimstone's big bald head was a billiard ball and the cane was a trick-shot cue. "What kind of stupid death-wish do you have, you fool?" he demanded.

"Cut it out!" Brimstone made a grab for his hat and Ez swung the cane with a great deal more force and satisfaction and struck the good doctor square in his black-clad butt. "OWW-oomph!" said Brimstone, and fell on his face in the road.

"Poison pens, hired thugs, and stealing cotter pins is one thing, but I absolutely draw the line at making me part of your hit-and-run fantasy. You have officially worn out your welcome, Damien old buddy old shoe, so kindly turn your evil ass around and go home!"

Ez threw the cane down, and Brimstone shakily got hold of it and used it to lever him up onto his knees. His mustache was drooping, his broad face was blotchy and he looked dangerously close to tears, making Ez feel, for just a

moment, like the world's oldest schoolyard bully. "You broke my hat," Brimstone said bleakly, staring down at the item in question.

"It isn't broken," Ez said crossly. He grabbed it out of Brimstone's hands, punched it back into shape and then thumped it down onto the doctor's head again. "Broken is what your bones would have been if I'd been turning on the radio or sneezing or anything at all when you pulled that stupid stunt."

Brimstone finished standing up and shuffled his feet, holding his cane in both hands. All the fight, all the insidiousness and villainy was utterly out of him. He was just an overweight, middle-aged man in an extremely tacky Halloween costume, standing in the desert. He looked ridiculous.

Ez had a puppy when he was eleven. He came barreling home from school one day and flung open the kitchen door hard enough to knock the puppy (who had been barreling toward its young master with equal enthusiasm) all the way into the living room. It had hid under the sofa for six hours, crying.

This was worse.

"Oh, all right, come on." Ez began slapping road dust brusquely from Brimstone's cape and overcoat. "You're not hurt, just ... just don't do it again. Enough with the road-skulking."

Brimstone muttered something that might have been an apology. His hat fell off.

Ez picked it up, fishing for something more to say, and with a wrenching sense of helplessness, said, "We found more bones."

Brimstone looked up, puzzled, and reached for his hat. "What?"

"You know that funny skull my assistant found?" When Brimstone's eyes sharpened, Ez sighed and dropped the hammer. "We found more bones."

"Do tell." A stray breeze suddenly rolled through, catching Brimstone's cloak and sending it billowing out in a series of sinister snaps.

"Looks like the whole skeleton might be in there." Ez rubbed at the bridge of his nose, wincing. "And it's a brand new species, too."

Brimstone slapped his hat on his head and thumped his cane into the road, giving his mustache a sly twirl. "Perhaps I should come by and have a look," he offered, his eyes narrowing to evil slits. "As a professional courtesy, you understand."

"Miss Payne's been thinking up names," Ez continued, ignoring this last offer. "She wants to call it Bobosaur."

Brimstone actually leapt back, as though the words had magically transformed themselves into a fencer's foil and come flying at him. "Well, she can't!" he said, an expression of phenomenal umbrage darkening his face. He thumped a finger broadly into Ez's chest. "You tell her that proprietary rights of any find belong to the commander of the dig, not to assistants! And then you give it a *good* name! A name to



strike *terror* into the hearts and minds of children for all antiquity! A name like ... like..."

A glow slowly encompassed Brimstone, bathing him in serenity and bliss. He closed his eyes and he said softly, reverently, "Damius Brimstonasaurus."

Ez gave that the moment of silence Brimstone so obviously felt it deserved, and then said, "Rex. Damius Brimstonasaurus Rex."

Brimstone slid one eye open and peeked hopefully in Ez's direction. "You don't find that a trifle ostentatious?"

"Oh no no no!" Ez waved one hand laconically. "Some things demand ostentation."

Brimstone beamed. "Precisely! You see, scientific minds understand these things, even a mind as rustic as yours, and scientific minds know that newly-discovered species of dinosaur are not named—" Brimstone actually grimaced. "Bobasaur."

Why on Earth, Ez asked himself wearily, did he ever want to cheer this man up?

"I'll pass that on," Ez said, and turned to go.

"Do that," Brimstone muttered, sounding distracted as he too prepared to abandon the scene of confrontation. "It's too bad you can't spank the little baggage for bad taste in names."

Ez froze, then turned sharply. "What?"

Brimstone started, then slapped on a huge smile and twirled his mustache wildly. "Nothing! I say, glorious morning, I'll just toddle off! Ta!" He swooped around and lit into a dead run, cane in hand and cape flapping.

Digging Up Bones  
*by Robin Smith*

Ez watched him go, trying to tell himself that he hadn't just heard the doctor say that, and even if he had, it had only been a lucky guess or something. "Ta," he growled, and returned to his truck.

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## Chapter Ten

To his absolute astonishment, Ez found Pop's Place fully stocked with gas cans. Since it was unlikely that Brimstone had the heart of a normal human being (unless he had it in a jar somewhere), Ez could only assume that Brimstone wasn't involved in the theft of the original. Either that, or he had something extra-devious in mind and wanted to lull Ez into a false sense of security. Every now and then, it occurred to Ez that the worst part about having to fend off one's own personal super-villain wasn't the villainy itself, but the paranoia it bred into you.

Ez had every intention of buying a couple of cheeseburgers and a post-spanking slushee for his poor assistant, but first, there was a phone call he had to make. As Pops eavesdropped discretely from a few aisles over, Ez sat down behind the cash register and made the call he had always thought would thrill him; he dialed up the deputy Dean at BYU and told him about the bones.

The ensuing conversation was a long one. Fortunately, Ez had come prepared with his log books, because ol' Deputy Doug was intent on hearing every little detail about the discovery and excavation. Under normal circumstances, it took a lot to get the man that excited—paleontology was not Doug Hammer's strong suit—and Ez knew he should be on Cloud Nine, but he wasn't.

"You sure you want to finish heading this one up, Esben?" the deputy asked suddenly. "It's going to be another few weeks at least ... and you're sounding a little worn."

Worn. Yeah, he felt a little worn. Like there was someone he was missing already. "I'm okay," he said instead. "Just, you know, Brimstone and all of his silly nonsense."

Yeah, and if he said it often enough, he might even start to believe that.

On impulse, Ez said, "Supposing I was to finish out the dig, can I keep on my assistant?"

"Ah...."

That would be a 'no.'

"Ordinarily, I'd say 'yes,'" Doug was saying. "But since the school will be sending a dozen students out there, we'd just as soon you take your pick from someone we don't have to pay."

"Mm-hm." Ez sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "Gotcha. Listen ... um, hypothetically, if I wanted to keep my assistant, do you think you could hook me up somewhere else?"

There was a long, staticy silence. Then: "Are ... Are you *serious*? You don't want in on the biggest find in your career? This is *huge*, Esben! This could even make up for that whole Kazakhstan debacle! Why would you want to pass on that?"

"Because I have lost my mind."

Another silence, even longer this time. "Is it a girl?" Deputy Doug sounded shocked.

Ez rubbed his eyes and didn't answer.

Warily now, Doug pressed, "Is it a guy?"

"It's a very simple question," Ez groaned. "Can you hook me up or not?"

"Well, I ... I could, sure. I could find someplace where you could ... Esben, you DO know that fraternizing with an assistant that the university supplies with a paycheck is kind of a touchy area, don't you?" Without waiting for an answer, the deputy went hurriedly on. "I mean, sure, I could get you a site out in ... let's see ... there's Colorado ... there's Xin—some place in China ... there's a spot open in the Antarctica International Dig.... You're an idiot, but yeah, I can find you someplace."

"I appreciate your candor, Doug, you're a prince among men."

"And you're making a huge mistake, but it's your life. Now let's go back to business, Esben. Read me out the data logs from the beginning. Did you find anything at that location prior to the skull?"

Ez let his troublesome brain numb over as he turned his attention back to dates, discoveries and measurements.

Much, much later, Ez was driving back to camp with cooling cheeseburger smelling up the car and his heart like a stone somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach. He'd just thrown away the chance of a lifetime, which he was one thousand percent convinced he would not regret, provided the woman he'd thrown it away for was willing to come along for the ride. All he had to do now was ask her how she'd felt about chucking the whole Georgia-thing—after all, she still had that bottle of sand to keep her company—so she could hang out with the virtual stranger who liked to pick unfair

moments to spank her. Oh yeah, he was in there. In like Flynn.

He could not believe what he was doing with his life.

"Never mind," he told himself fiercely. "I'll go home, ply the woman with cheeseburgers and a cherry slushee, and just ask her.... ah, who am I kidding?"

It wasn't that Ez feared rejection. In truth, the really awful part was that he was positive that Kasia would come with him if he asked. He hadn't missed that scary little fact in the way she looked at him. She was very innocent in her own way, despite the street-hard shell she wore, and in her clumsy way, she had been trying very hard to let him know that he wouldn't be entirely unwelcome in her tent. No warm-blooded human male over seventeen could fail to see those signals. And maybe ol' Deputy Doug was right and Ez was an idiot, but he just couldn't be the kind of man who led a vulnerable girl into making decisions when she wasn't in her right mind, either.

A man had to be careful, that was all. There could be such a fine line between letting a lady know you were interested and taking advantage of a subordinate. The fact that Kasia didn't appear to have the same compunctions against co-worker romances only made the problem thornier, because now Ez had to shoulder the full burden of what was appropriate. Besides, he felt keenly the difference in their positions. He wasn't just "working with" her, he was her boss. It was all too easy to imagine that she might just agree to sign up for another tour of bone-digging duty out of a fear of being set adrift in the Utah desert.

Ah, but that wasn't all that was easy to imagine. With Miss Kasia Payne, it was far easier to believe she'd cold-cock the man that made her feel pressured. Sexual harassment was surely something that a pretty girl in Kasia's situation had to face frequently, and Kasia definitely had the wit to recognize it and the strength to resist it. The uncertain intimacy in Kasia's advances—recreating his childhood candy bar and sharing the contents of her backpack—these were not the actions of a woman schooled in the sexual arts. And that made her efforts all the more effective ... and made his restraint all the more necessary.

But okay, as long as a fella was imagining easy things, why not throw restraint to the wind just once and imagine a life together? He couldn't give her Georgia beaches, but she didn't seem completely repelled by sleeping in a tent. She was smart, she was strong, and beneath the armor her hard life had fastened on her, she had a blend of warmth and openness that made a man want to put his arms around her and just keep them there forever.

And on the physical side (sure, why not? He was alone in the truck, far from the mind-reading devices of the CIA, why not mentally ogle the girl?) she had to be one of the most perfect specimens of the female form Ez had ever seen on this side of a television screen. Nature's accident had made her beautiful, hard work had made her fit, and a near-total lack of awareness of either of these qualities made her so much fun to compliment. She had the most remarkable blush....

He could live with a woman like that, Ez decided. Heck, he could marry a woman like that. She'd probably never throw a Christmas tree at him and break his favorite Spiderman ornament. He'd have to come to some sort of arrangement regarding his infrequent forays into rule-breaking, but it would be worth a hundred-dollar check per infraction to keep on spanking her.

Ez didn't spank for his own pleasure, although some of his significant exes had enjoyed a little extra warming up before bedtime, and he had been willing to oblige them. But Kasia, after the initial upset and stomach-punching had worked through her system, had come to submit to spanking with such heartfelt humility that he sometimes wished she'd act up more often. Of course, having her curled up on his lap afterwards didn't hurt.

Oh yes. That would be the life. They could be the first husband and wife paleontologists—or at least, the first that Ez had ever heard of—and life would be one long string of happy digs and happy fossils and unhappy spankings and happy makings-up after spankings, not to mention happy times in the tent at night.

Okay, so maybe he wasn't exactly being realistic right now. It wasn't simple asking a girl to give up her life-long dream of warm weather and sandy beaches just to follow a man she'd known only two weeks around the world, digging up dead things from millions of years ago, but it was still a pleasant thought.

And maybe ... maybe it wasn't all that unrealistic. Ez knew he was deeply in like—and the real thing, too—and he



suspected the feeling was mutual. And two people in like, why, they could do anything. They could even end up in love. And love and fossils ... anywhere in the world could be a beach in Georgia if two people had love and fossils.

So he'd ask her. Why not? The worst she could say, 'Are you out of your mind? You couldn't fill a swimming pool with enough gold bricks to make me go with you to the supermarket, much less on another miserable dig site, you laughable excuse for a man, you!', and really, what were the odds of being told something like that twice in one lifetime?

Ez switched on the radio and began to whistle along with the static as he drove home.

\* \* \* \*

The Professor was gone a long time. Not having a watch only made it seem longer. And of course, feeling the bruise ache of the morning's spanking flare up anytime she moved made the long time positively interminable.

Kasia worked as much as she could, but the truth was, there just wasn't that much left to do. The Sara-site and the Terry-site were both emptied and closed down. Bob was off-limits; the far wall with its hidden cache of bones was capped with plaster and closed off for good. And now Rex, the largest and deepest of the digs, was nearing completion. The few remaining exposed bones had already been photographed and documented. Removing them was tedious and painstaking work, made torturous by her throbbing bottom, but at least it took her mind off the question of time.

Kasia triumphed over her aching back, aching butt and aching knees, but a single stomach-rumble drove her from the depths of Rex and up into the light for a late breakfast. She stirred up a fire, picked listlessly through the dwindling contents of their food box, and ultimately emptied a can of Spaghetti-Rings into a pot. While it warmed up, she helped herself to a bottle of water and forced herself to sit down and drink it, telling herself sternly that was part of her penance.

A watched pot of Spaghetti-Rings never heats up. Kasia stared out at the desert, watching sun, shadow and wind constantly reshape the landscape. She thought she could see the ground go on forever; she hadn't realized there was a ridge only a few hundred feet out until Hugo came up out of it.

Instinct had propelled her to her feet and two steps towards the safety of the trailer before her brain finished assimilating the reason why. Hugo was big, but then Hugo was always big. And with the sun beating down on him overhead, Hugo's face was lost in shadow, but then he wasn't exactly a man who relied on expression in order to be charming. No, the cause of Kasia's concern had to be the length of 2 x 4 resting on Hugo's shoulder.

Brimstone's minion marched into the exact middle of camp, stopping mere inches from Kasia's toes. He hefted the chunk of lumber off his shoulder and let his hands flex on it while he looked thunderously around. When his eyes returned to her face, he said, "Where's your boss?"

Oo boy.

Kasia inched a little bit back toward the trailer again. "What's up, tiger?" she ventured.

Hugo's brow furrowed and his huge fingers drummed on the wood as he thought. It took a long time.

"Okay," he said at last, and planted the 2 x 4 with a thump between his feet. "Honesty is important in relationships, right? So tell me the truth." Hugo leaned in extremely close, filling all of Kasia's field of vision with his very angry face. "Did your boss really hit ya this morning?"

Kasia felt her eyes bug out so far, she would not have been surprised if they'd popped out and hit Hugo in the chin. The flaming of her upper cheeks momentarily eclipsed even the continuing flares of the bottom ones. And in retrospect, a good 'Hell no!' or even a 'What?' probably would have been the best ways to answer him, but at the time, the only thing she was capable of saying was, "How the hell did you find out? Were you watching?" Good God, she'd been bare-assed and everything!

Hugo's eyes flashed. No, they didn't. They lit up slow, but they kept right on getting brighter, until they were damned near spotlights in his very dark face. He straightened up to his full height and raised the 2 x 4 again. "Okay," he said, and squared a jaw that was already square enough to use on a drafting board. "Where is he?"

Kasia looked at the lumber. Hugo's fingers actually seemed to be digging grooves in it. "I don't suppose you're going to carve that into a paddle and present it with your good wishes," she said weakly.

"Oh, I'm gonna present it, all right." Hugo stomped over and unzipped the nearest tent. "I'm gonna present it all up and down his puny, broken body. I ain't been goonin' all these years for nothin', lady." He moved to check the other tent.

Kasia followed him, zipping things back up in his wake. "You're getting a little carried away," she said. "It's not that big a deal. See, I broke the rules yesterday, and—"

"No offense, lady." Hugo swung around and glared down at her. "But I don't care if you pulled a gun and shot the guy. There ain't *no* excuse good enough for a man to hit a lady. A real man can solve his problems without ever resortin' to violence. Now tell me where he is so's I can pound him into dust."

Somehow, Kasia didn't think he'd appreciate having the essential flaw in that statement pointed out to him. "I'm flattered," she said cautiously. "You're really sweet in an extremely scary and menacing way. But you really are blowing this all out of proportion. Professor Esben didn't 'hit'-hit me. He just spanked me."

Remarkable. Only a few minutes ago, she'd have never put this morning's punishment down in the light-hearted category of "just" a spanking. Funny how a giant goon and chunk of fir could change a girl's perspective.

Hugo was taking his time processing this new information. Slowly, the 2 x 4 lowered and the fire went out of his eyes. "What, like a ... a hand spankin'?" He looked her up and down, bewildered. "You're too big for spankin's!"

Poor guy. His confusion could not be greater if Kasia had just posed him the riddle of Schrödinger's cat and asked him to express it through interpretive dance.

"The Professor doesn't think anyone is too big for spankings," she said.

Hugo assimilated that, his lumber now trailing in the dust. "A spankin'," he muttered, and then looked up sharply. "And you're okay with that?"

"Sure. Well, no, not 'okay', but I can deal. They don't come out of nowhere, you know. I've got a list of very simple rules, and when I break them—"

"What rules?"

"Don't swear." Kasia still couldn't help rolling her eyes a little at that one. "Don't wander off. Keep the camp pest-free. No mean talk or name-calling. Don't throw dirt," she added, after a moment's thought. "That one doesn't come up too often."

"Those are pretty good rules," Hugo mumbled, his gaze dropping again.

"Yes, they are. And I've got it under control, so you don't need to do any wood-working." Kasia reached out slowly.

Hugo swung the 2 x 4 back up to his shoulder. "Naw, but I still need to keep it. It's part of the Boss's tent." He frowned. "Well, I guess I just got to ask you the other thing."

Kasia stepped back. "What other thing?"

"I forgot my paper, give me a sec." Hugo squinted at the sky and thought. "Okay, here goes. We've been datin' for a while," he began.

Kasia's eyebrows rose, very slowly, all on their own.

"And now that you're all won-over and stuff," Hugo continued. "It's time to start makin' plans for our future. So here's the plan. You know those bones the Boss is so jumped up about? Well, you got to get 'em and leave 'em out here, and I'll come over tonight and steal 'em." He looked at her expectantly.

"How is this essential to our future?" Kasia asked.

Hugo didn't appear to have studied for a question-and-answer period. He looked surprised at first, and then deeply meditative. "I suppose," he said slowly, "that if we steal the bones like he wants, the Boss'll let us have a future."

"That can't be it. My boss has been thwarting yours for a long time, right? He's got to be used to losing by now."

Hugo snorted, astoundingly cow-like. "Gosh, you'd think so, wouldn't ya?" he muttered, and then focused on her once more. "But that's what he wrote: Makin' plans for our future."

"Well, what's my motivation here?" Kasia asked, starting to smile. "Am I supposed to think we're going to sell the bones for money for our wedding or something?"

"Naw, I don't think he's selling—What?" Hugo dropped the 2 x 4 and stared at her. "Wedding?"

"Well, when a guy starts talking about 'our future', what's a girl supposed to think? After all," she added sardonically, "we have been dating for a while."

"Well, yeah, but..." Hugo scratched his head, clearly caught out and unsure how to proceed. "The Boss never said nothin' about getting me hitched. I know he's not whatcha call a detail-man but..."

Kasia was grinning openly now.

"Well, okay." Hugo shrugged and dropped his arm. "I guess I been a bachelor long enough, and you're a classy dame. I could do worse. I want lots of kids, though."

"Wha—? Wait a minute!"

"You just leave the bones out here for me tonight." Hugo picked up his lumber and turned to go. He paused, turned back, and planted a heavy and wholly unexpected kiss on Kasia's cheek. "I'll take care of everything else. And don't worry. Goons got great benefits. We get paid honeymoon and everything. I'm thinking Chicago."

Kasia was still standing slack-jawed as Hugo disappeared down the ridge and Ez's pickup rattled up and parked.

"Okay!" she heard the Professor say as he jumped from the cab. "No interruptions! I'm telling that Kazakhstan story all the way through and that's final, so if you've got something to say, it better be good!"

Kasia turned around. "I just got engaged."

Ez looked at her for a few minutes, the time measured by the ticking of the truck's engine.

"Good enough," he said finally.

\* \* \* \*

Ez listened as Kasia relayed the whole story for the second time, finishing again where she had begun: "He knew you spanked me." For her, it was the most salient point.

And Ez had to admit, it was a good one. He hadn't noticed Brimstone or his minions actually skulking around in the shadows and spying on them in the past few days. For that matter, he wouldn't have thought it was possible to do that

much skulking in the Utah flatlands. But Brimstone knew, and so did his lackeys, and that meant—

"You know, it's possible that they know about your evil plan to switch the bones," Ez remarked.

Kasia made a face any six-year old would be proud of. "I thought of that, too. I even thought maybe he's got the place bugged, but then I remembered that this isn't a movie and spy stuff costs money. Echoes are free, however, and there's a good-sized gully off that way, right between our camp and his."

"I know. One of my students broke an ankle down there." Ez paced a little ways in that direction, frowning. "So you're thinking what? The Good Doctor just happened to overhear our little transgression-session this morning when he was on his way to throw himself under the wheels of my truck, and then he turned around and told Hugo? Why?"

"How should I know? Maybe he was hoping Hugo would knock you into orbit. Maybe he just thought it was funny." Kasia's hand slipped back and snuck in a rub, scowling blackly and unfocusedly at the very idea of finding her abused posterior humorous. "Who knows? The point is, he knows you spank me and I'm ... I'm.... Is pissed off a swear?"

"Fraid so." Ez kicked a loose rock into the ravine that marked the neutral zone between his camp and Brimstone's. In the distance, he could even make the black, flapping tents and tarps that made the Doctor's dig. Where the man even got a black tarp was a mystery to Ez. "However, I think the greater point is, we have our gas can back and the BYU is



sending in the cavalry, so we only have to put up with him for a few more days."

"No, *you* only have to put up with him for a few more days. I'm marrying into that moron convention. Brimstone'll probably want to give the bride away, assuming he's not secretly an evil priest as well as an evil paleontologist." She slumped against the side of the trailer, her hands in her pockets, looking glum. "Hugo wants to honeymoon in Chicago, for Chr—for Pete's sake. In the middle of winter."

Every day was a great day for self-discovery. Ez discovered he couldn't listen to his Miss Payne even joke about honeymooning with a goon without getting testy.

"You're right, let's focus on the immediate picture," Ez agreed, and came back to camp, looking over her shoulder as if she could burn his eyes if he looked directly into her face. "Hugo's coming tonight for the bones. Did you actually say you'd steal them?"

"I'm ... not sure," she said slowly, her brows knitting with child-like puzzlement. "Honestly, I was concentrating so hard on the whole proposal-thing that—"

"You realize," Ez interrupted, "that anyone who listened to that story would think it was you who did the proposing."

She shot him a wry smile. "Well, I didn't hear any offers from your end, chief. A girl can only wait so long."

Ez actually felt himself getting defensive, as ridiculous as that was. "Call me an old-fashioned guy, but I thought we should date at least once before I popped the question."

"Come off of it," she scoffed, flapping her hand at him. "We've been living together for a month now."

Good point. The sense of play dropped out of him and he looked at her, caught at once by the twin prisons of her eyes. The teasing light in her faded; her smile became lop-sided, uneasy. 'Okay,' he thought. 'Just like I rehearsed it in the truck...'

"I don't advocate this kind of thing normally," he began. "But would you consider dumping your fiancé if you, hypothetically, got a better offer?"

Kasia pushed herself slowly off the side of the trailer and came a step toward him, her eyes wide and blinking rapidly. A smile, faint and skittish, kept trying to appear at the corners of her mouth. "Define 'better'."

"Well ... I was thinking China." He held his breath, waiting.

She continued to stare at him for a heartbeat or two, but slowly the smile striving to shape itself flickered and died out. "China," she said. Her voice was as flat as the ground beneath her feet.

"Yeah." Ez gave her his winningest smile. "They have shantungosaurs."

"Oh. Joy."

Kasia spun on her heel, took three tight steps and then turned around and shouted, "What the hell is the matter with you? I tell you I just got engaged to another man and you offer me a shantungosaurus?! Have I just been imagining everything all this time? You—" She stopped and eyed him warily. "You're not gay, are you?"

"What's wrong with shantungosaurs?"

"They're *dead*, you bonehead! And I'm alive." Her voice cracked on the last word and she looked at him, all her anger

melting into confusion. "Do you think I'd let you spank me if I didn't really think you cared about me? Even when I didn't like it, I believed that much. And you ... you want to take me to China to dig up more bones?"

"I thought you liked digging up bones."

"I *love* digging up bones!" she yelled, and swiped at her eyes. "But only because ... you ... oh, leave me alone!"

Ez watched in numb amazement as Kasia stomped over to her tent and yanked it open. He had not idea how this had gone so wrong so quickly. He kept thinking of his fantasies and one-sided debates in the truck. Funny, he'd never anticipated this reaction when he'd wondered about the worst way she could respond. Not until she emerged with her backpack in hand did he realize that things could get even worse. "Hey, wait a minute!" he stammered.

"Sorry, chief. I'm all out of minutes." She started marching west out to the road, her head high and her hair flying out behind her like lightning in her own private storm. "And I don't work for you anymore."

He went after her without thinking, catching her by the arm and taking a backpack to the side of his head for his troubles. The struggle was a short-lived one; she was a strong woman, but her heart wasn't in this one. She was already crying by the time he'd de-packed her and had her over his knee on the ground.

"What did I tell you about hitting?" he demanded, and gave her one to the seat of her jeans.

She bucked against his leg, tried to kick back once, and then sagged into the sand, weeping. "You don't mean it. This

is just a game to you. You made me think I was someone special and all the while you just wanted to take me to China!"

"Yeah, but I was only thinking of taking one tent!" he snapped. "Only you didn't let me get to that part!"

She went silent, tense and shivering, staring at the patch of ground between her hands.

"You know, I admire your strength and your spirit and all the rest of that," he continued, taking deep breaths and flexing his hand in the air. "But girl, you can really be a brat sometimes. I like you a lot, but that steel of yours needs some serious tempering, and we do that with fire." He began to spank her, his hand slapping steadily and with increasing force across her bottom. Even without the visual aid of pinkening flesh, he was able to cover her completely, neglecting no part of her nethers. "You don't get to be in control all the time," he told her, laying in a swift half-dozen to that tender crease between her buttocks and thighs. "Once in a while, you get to stay for the whole conversation and not fly off the handle just because you don't hear exactly what you want exactly when you want it."

She didn't scream or struggle. Her legs kicked in place, as though she were trying to run face-down on the sand, but these were the mindless gyrations of a body in pain, not a true bid for escape. She covered her face in her hands and cried.

"And as a side-note, it should come as no surprise after all this time that I am not going to let you walk off into the desert." He gave that lesson a series of extra-hard, extra-fast

swats, eliciting wails straight from the heart of his captive. "I am not going to let you hit me." CRACK-CRACK-CRACK went his hand, but still Kasia did not fight back. "And I'm not going to let you swear. Whether you like it or not, you are answerable for your actions, and if you can't be responsible for yourself, I'll be responsible for you."

He half-pulled her up, just enough to get his hands around to the front of her and unfasten her jeans. Her hand came back, not to cover herself or slap at him, but to take hold of the waist of her jeans and help push them down. Her tears never abated; the lost and heartsick sound of them never lost their cutting edge.

Ez tugged her torn panties down to her thighs and applied himself to her bare backside, still blushed and swollen from the morning's spanking. He sent a count of three to each cheek, turning dull pink to throbbing red all at once. "I'm not making these rules up just to pass the time, and I'm sure as heck not having any fun!" The drumming of his hand became a cannonade, underscored all the while by her defeated weeping. He swung until his arm ached and his hand felt like it was on fire, and then he steeled himself for one last swat, the kind to put a perfection exclamation point on the end of this prisoner's sentence.

She howled and beat her fist against the ground, but she didn't try to get away, and he couldn't help but be proud of her.

He pulled her up and into his lap, cupping her chin so that she had to face him. "I like you," he said. "I want to be with you. I'm throwing away the find of my lifetime just so I can

take you to China, because China is the *only* place I can keep you. It's not the shantungosaurs—"

She rolled her wet eyes and gave a knowing groan.

"All right, it's not *just* the shantungosaurs," he amended.

"Which, by the way, are awesome fossils. It's you. And contrary to what you think, something doesn't have to be dead sixty million years for me to be interested in it. All I ask is that, once in a while, you let me take the lead."

She looked at him, her lip trembling. "So lead," she whispered.

Ez wiped the tears from her cheeks, then cupped her face and kissed her. He tasted salt, but there was no pain in the way she received him; her mouth opened to his and she kissed him back, clumsily but with all her heart. Her fingers brushed shyly at his shoulders, and then traced fire down his chest.

The surge of desire she inspired in him was insistent, but he made himself pull away. "Maybe we shouldn't do this," he said. "Your fiancé strikes me as the jealous sort."

"I'll let him down easy," she told him, her eyes burning into his. "Tell him I got a better offer. I always wanted to see a shantungosaurus."

In a feat of instinctual athleticism that he would never have imagined himself capable of, Ez put his arms around her and stood, lifting her with him. "Let me tell you about shantungosaurs," he said seriously, and carried her into his tent.

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## Chapter Eleven

Time doesn't stop for man, tide, or conjugal bliss. Come daylight, Ez's snores were at last sufficient to reinstate a sense of duty over sleepiness on Kasia's mental list of priorities. She disconnected herself from the tangled bedding and Ez protested her parting by burrowing deeper under the now-solo sleeping bag and snoring louder. Tonight she'd bring her air-mattress in here. Ez's tent may be roomier, but she didn't think their newfound romance would last much longer if they had to keep sleeping on the uncushioned desert ground.

But even these prickly thoughts couldn't take the smile off her face. In fact, if she'd ever been happier in her life than she was now, she couldn't remember when. It wasn't the sex, although the sex was great, and it wasn't necessarily sleeping beside him with his arm (and, for much of the night, his leg) draped over her, although that was a big part of it, too. It was all of it, all of him and all of her. Of being vulnerable and feeling protected, being strong and feeling admired; it was the sense of genuine warmth and caring she felt from him and the sincerity that came from knowing he would take no crap, not even to get into her pants. It made what they shared more real, more ... ah hell, maybe he'd know a word for it, but she didn't.

And she'd have plenty of time to thrash out a definition in China. But right now, she had work to do.

She dressed as quietly as she could—solicitous of her, perhaps, but kind of pointless, considering how much noise he

was making—and slipped out of the tent into the cold morning air. She kicked at the coals of yesterday's fire, but first things first. Time to spread out some snake juice.

But when Kasia turned toward the trailer, she saw the one thing she never expected to see this morning. She saw the plaster jacket holding the plastic dinosaur that Hugo should have been by to smuggle out in the night.

Had he forgotten? Unlikely. Hugo took his gooning seriously, and anyway, Brimstone wasn't likely to let him forget.

For a moment, Kasia wondered if perhaps he'd come by early and maybe overheard the, er, rather zealous activities in Ez's tent. Not that she'd been auditioning for opera, but she hadn't exactly been muzzling herself either.

But no, seeing as how they were engaged and all, Kasia didn't think Hugo was the sort to slip blushing back into the night if he'd heard something ... connubial. He was, in fact, far more likely to rip the tent open and beat Ez to death with a truck.

So ... what then?

"Gosh, I hope nothing happened to him," she muttered, unlocking the trailer. Maybe she should wander out that way and just make sure he wasn't lying out somewhere with a broken ankle. Ez wouldn't let her wander off, exactly, but he might come with her. Hugo was her fiancé, after all. A man had a certain obligation to make sure his new lover's fiancé wasn't out dying in the desert.

Well, she'd get the snakes shooed off first, and she'd go peek over the chasm before she did anything drastic like



wake Ez up. Hugo might just be holed up waiting for the two of them to skedaddle off to town before he made his move.

But as Kasia headed out to the perimeter line with the snake oil, she discovered that Hugo had very definitely been by in the night. That was his size fourteen sneaker print in the dirt, going right over the top of her tracks from yesterday. And they were recent ones, too. The disturbed dirt was still a dark brick color and not the washed out maroon of the surrounding sky-bleached earth. He'd been here, all right, just a few minutes before Kasia had woken up, and then he'd left. Why hadn't he taken the fake bone?

Puzzled, Kasia turned around and followed Hugo's sneaker prints, the blue can of snake oil heavy but forgotten in her hand. The tracks went unhurriedly across the camp in more or less a straight line. They drew up and pointed at the trailer once, proving that Hugo had definitely seen the fake jacket, had even stood and stared at it for a while, and then they turned away and moved on. They didn't even dip towards the tent, though. They went out toward the tarp-covered dig sites. Right past the plaster bundle clearly labeled NEW SKULL and straight to Bob.

Where ... Oh God, where the real skull was drying.

Kasia dropped the snake oil and ran, skidding down the stone-carved steps and into the dim underground of Bobasaur, but it didn't take more than a glance to see it was empty.

"Oh Hugo!" Her hand rose and smacked painfully into her own forehead. The plan was foolproof, all right. It just so happened that they should have made it goonproof.

Close by, a car's engine came to life, and not just any engine, but the distinctive thunder of Brimstone's hearse. Kasia whirled and clambered out of the dig. Maybe there was still time. She snatched the fake-bone jacket from the side of the trailer—dammit, Hugo, if it'd been a snake, it would have BIT you!—and raced for the road.

The tail-lights were just dropping away when she got there; Hugo was a firm believer in lights on for safety. Hang on. Hugo was a firm believer in good driving always. Hands at ten and two, keep it under the speed limit ... There was no way he'd take a rough road like this more than twenty-five. And the road hairpinned where it dropped down to the crossroads. She could cut him off.

Kasia did glance back at the tent (still issuing its sleeping-Professor snores) but she was already racing off into the desert. She couldn't take the time to go back and get him, and she couldn't risk a parting shout for fear that Hugo might hear it if he had the window open. Anyway, it was just a jog down the sloping desert to the road, catch Hugo at the T-section, switch the jackets, and then run back. She'd be back in camp in five minutes, ten if she stopped to tell Hugo what a bonehead he was, and Ez would never even know she was gone. And if he did wake up—and the way her luck was running, he probably would—well, she'd take her whupping like a big girl. It was easier to get spanked than to let Brimstone have her skull.

She hit the ridge that the road hairpinned around and skidded down it dune-style, feet wide apart and her hand behind her like a rudder. She knew she was flaying the skin

right off her palm, but she could see the plume of dust that marked the hearse's progress and she knew she was in time. She raced out to the road, waving one arm wildly, and was gratified to Hugo first brake sharply and then back up.

"Don't call him an idiot," she told herself fiercely. "Whatever you do, just don't call him an idiot. Marriages never work as well after spouses start calling each other names."

The driver's door opened and Hugo unfolded himself with elephantine grace.

"You took the wrong jacket, you idiot!" Kasia shouted, thrusting the fake one out. "Look, 'new skull'," she read, underlining the printed letters with her finger several times. "Right next to the trailer. How could it possibly be any clearer?"

Hugo flushed, looking sincerely sheepish. "I didn't think ya'd leave it right out in the open," he said. "I figured ya'd made a fake for ya Boss to find and hid the real one for me. What'd I take?"

What did he take? Kasia's mind whirled. "A ... bunch of trodons," she said.

"All in the same suit, like?" he asked, looking surprised.

"They died playing Twister," she snapped, and stomped over to the rear hatch of the hearse. Hugo, ever the gentleman, leaned over to open it for her and there was her skull, neatly wrapped and serenely stored in a plastic bucket so it couldn't roll around. She exchanged them, hugging the cool plaster tightly to her chest for a second or two.

"Sorry," Hugo said again. "Maybe we shoulda worked out where ya was gonna put the bones before-like."

Kasia put her sweaty palm flat on the hearse's rear window and gave the door a satisfying slam. Then she turned to face her fiancé. "Marriages are supposed to be based on good communication and trust," she stated. "When I communicate that I'm going to leave bones out for you to steal, you're supposed to trust me to do it without improvising."

Hugo kicked at the Utah dirt, avoiding her eyes. He mumbled something.

"What?"

"I said, I thought ya'd be smarter than that. At least, ya know, try to hide it."

Well, this was better than she could have hoped for—the start of a fight. It wasn't much of an opening, but if there was something Kasia Payne knew she did well, it was mutate innocent remarks like that into engagement-breaking dust-ups.

She recoiled theatrically, her free hand punching onto her hip. "Did you just call me stupid?" she demanded.

"No," he said patiently. "Just not too smart. About goonin' anyway. It don't matter," he assured her. "I'll take care of all that bit after we're married."

"I could never marry a man who doesn't think I could goon!" Kasia declared, and spun on her heel.

"Ah, hey!"

"No, no! You're the one who walked right past the bones I set out for you and you try to put the blame off on *my* bad

gooning? Oh no, boy, the wedding's off!" She started a good stalk back in the direction of the road.

Hugo plodded after her, protesting. "But ... Ah, come on, hold up! I already called my folks!"

"Well, now you can call and tell them how you hurt my feelings."

"Don't be like this," Hugo groaned, catching at her arm. "My uncle Nuncio's comin' all the way from Jersey. He's bringin' salami and new tires for us! Ma says you can wear her weddin' dress. Well, half of it," he amended, frowning. "That's a whole lotta dress. But it's pretty!"

"No! It'd never work. You don't respect me."

"Sure I do. I was gonna bust up your boss for ya, wasn't I? Ya don't do that for a dame ya don't respect."

"No!" She wrenched her arm hotly out of his grip. "You were using me the whole time just to steal the bones for Brimstone and when I finally give in and help you out, you make fun of the way I do it! Well, I don't have to put up with that! I'm leaving you, Hugo, and I'm taking the trodons with me!"

"Give me another chance," he pressed, stricken. "Just tell me who, I'll go break someone's legs for ya!"

"That isn't always the answer, Hugo." She tried again to stalk off and again, he lumbered after her.

"Lemme at least give ya a ride back," he said.

"No," she argued, beginning to feel a little impatient. "You just want to get me alone in the car."

"Why would I wanna do that?" He seemed genuinely puzzled. "It don't even have a back seat. Ah, Kass, wait up!"

His huge hand closed around—all the way around—her arm and he pulled her back and made her look at him. "I don't want ya walkin' back alone," he said, frowning. "There's snakes and stuff."

Yeah, and any minute now, Ez would be waking up. She'd hate to think what he'd do if she came rolling up in the car with Hugo. Or worse, if she came rolling up a day later wearing Hugo's Ma's wedding dress. Uncle Nuncio was coming all the way from Jersey, after all. There was a good chance this goon wouldn't take no for an answer once he got her in the hearse.

"I don't trust you now," she told him. "You'll run off and marry me."

Hugo looked hurt. "I would not!"

"I'll walk."

"But—"

"You take your hands off me right now, mister, or I'll scream."

Hugo removed the ham he was holding her with but remained where he was, looking pained. "Scream what?" he asked. "I ain't pawed ya or nothin'. I just don't want ya wandering off where there's snakes."

Gosh, it was a whole lot harder to pick a fight when the fighter wouldn't get angry or defensive. Worse, she was starting to feel sorry for him. Pretty soon, she'd be apologizing and then she'd probably wind up married out of guilt. Kasia switched tactics.

"Well, you should have thought of that before you broke up with me," she said.

"I broke up with you?" Hugo echoed, his broad face buckling with bewilderment.

"How could you?" Kasia cried, and covered her face for a few noisy sob-sounds. "After all the promises you made! You broke my heart!"

"Aw ... You'll get over me." He kicked at the dirt morosely. "Most girls do."

"Brute!" Kasia sobbed. "Heart-breaking brute! Leading me astray and then dumping me in the desert like this!"

"It's my looks," Hugo said with a mournful sigh. "This face is a curse."

Yeah, of the wicked-fairy-not-invited-to-the-christening variety, but she wasn't going to spoil things now that they were finally going the way she wanted.

"Go!" she said, shaking her shoulders a little harder. "Just leave me to wallow in misery!"

At last Hugo backed up. He jammed his hands into his pockets and looked at his feet for a few seconds. "I never meant to hurt ya," he said finally, and then killed the little twinge of guilt those words kindled in her by adding, "Usually when I mean to hurt people, I'm aware of it, ya know?"

"Yeah." She rubbed at her eyes, avoiding his heavy gaze. "You're a great goon, Hugo. I'm sorry things didn't work out."

"Me, too, kinda." He turned around and trudged back to the hearse, but paused with one leg up in the driver's side to look back at her. "I'll send ya the tires," he said.

Brave man. "You can keep the salami," she told him.

He nodded weightily, lowered himself into the hearse, and drove away.

She watched him go until even the cloud of dust the hearse kicked up was gone. Then she turned around and started back towards camp. It was too hard to climb up the ridge where she'd slid down. Loose sand over hard rock and a twenty-foot climb was an exercise in futility; she was more than a little amazed she'd made it down with nothing but a skinned palm. So she followed the road as it hairpinned up the steepest slope and then set off over the desert.

It had been a five-minute run to get to Hugo, surely no more than that, so why did it seem like it was taking twice as long to run back? Post-break-up stress, maybe. The sun was getting hotter and the wind was starting to kick up a little, blowing around little track-erasing funnels. Dust-devils, those were called. When she was kid, someone once told her there were little demons inside that would eat you if you got lost. Little kids would say anything.

The ground beneath her feet rose slowly and steadily for a while, and then abruptly opened into a ravine. Had she come over a ravine? She couldn't remember. She circled around it, hunting for something that looked familiar, remotely aware that it took a long time to circle all the way around.

She found herself looking around to see if she could see the road, thinking maybe she'd follow it all the way back after all. But without Brimstone's hearse kicking up a trail, there was no sign of anything but desert and distant mountains. She turned and followed her footprints for a while, but where the ground hardened, they faded out, and when the soft sand came in again, there were no footprints.



This was starting to feel really bad. She couldn't see the road, she was getting further and further away from her back-trail, and Ez was almost certainly awake by now. She was in trouble, she knew she was in trouble, but a spanking was waaay down on her list of concerns.

'Say it,' she thought distractedly, as she continued to put her feet down ahead of each other on the heating desert hardpan. 'Say it. Just say it.'

She stopped moving and hugged the plaster-wrapped skull close to her chest, looking around one last time in a vain effort to spy the flapping tarps and monolithic trailer of camp. She saw only desert, scrub, mountains, valleys.

"I'm lost," she whispered.

A dust-devil blew by.

\* \* \* \*

Ez didn't panic when he woke up alone in the tent. He didn't panic when he emerged into the late morning, sleepily calling Kasia's name to no reply. He didn't even panic when he saw no fire in the firepit and no breakfast being prepared. But when he saw the blue plastic gas can on its side at the entry to Bobasaur, well, there was a time and place for everything and this was panic's time.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed her name. The sound of it bounced up and down the desert, but there was no answer of any kind. He made one quick and extremely thorough check of the campsite, just long enough to see that the new skull as well as Kasia's fake were both

just as gone as she was, and then he swung into the truck and fired it up.

There was only one place she could be and only one person responsible. Stealing cotterpins and menacing him with minions was one thing, but abducting girlfriends was another. Ez was not a violent man by nature, but to help him, if he found Kasia tied to a mine-car track somewhere, he was going to knock Brimstone out of this world and back into the pulp comic that had spawned him.

His suspicions intensified as he pulled into the Doctor's camp and saw the frenetic pace at which its master was preparing to leave. The minions were lugging huge lumps of plaster jackets back and forth from the dig sites to the funereal trailer and Brimstone himself was rolling black tarps as quickly as he could. When Ez pulled into the middle of camp and braked, far from appearing surprised, Brimstone only worked faster, until his cape was flapping out in rhythmic billows behind him and his round cheeks were rosied up with effort.

"Where is she?" Ez thundered, bursting out of the cab. He slammed the door with a satisfyingly explosive sound and advanced across the camp. "No more games, buster! What have you done with her?"

"Why, my dear Professor, whatever do you me!rk?!" Brimstone's polite if somewhat frazzled inquiry ended in sputtering as Ez got a grip on the man's cravat and cinched it tight. His gloved hands slapped wildly at Ez's wrist as his face purpled up, but he managed to maintain an expression of urbane interest. "Uck eems o'ee agh uggo?"

"I'll tell you what the trouble is," Ez said, and unhanding the Doctor's sinister person with a shove. "You kidnapped my assistant, that's what seems to be the trouble. And you have exactly ten seconds to produce her before the trouble reflects back on you with a mighty blast and sixty million years from now, the archeologists of the future are going to be digging you out of the ground with their laser-shovels, drinking future-coffee and wondering how your parietals got wedged so far up your pelvic girdle. Where is she?"

And color him crazy, but Brimstone looked genuinely surprised. His hands had paused in the act of reknitting his cravat at a less strangulating stricture and even his mustache was quivering with concern. "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," he said finally, and pushed Ez out of the way so that he could wave urgently at the minions. Brimstone met them halfway as they lumbered over, but Ez couldn't make out more than the muttering rise and fall of Brimstone's voice.

Hugo raised his head out of the huddle and sent a frown Ez's way. "She ain't back yet?"

"No," Ez said. "She's not back yet. Back from what?"

Hugo handed his fossil—in a plaster jacket the size and approximate shape of a full-grown tiger shark—to Rocky (who took it easily, despite having one nearly as big already in hand) and came toward him with an expression of growing disquiet spreading over his face. And on that face, there was a lot of room for disquiet to spread out. "She shoulda been back long before now."

"You saw her this morning?"

"Yeah, she come after me when I was—"

Brimstone cleared his throat casually, the effect spoiled somewhat by the fact that he also leaped up and thwacked his minion sharply on the back of his square head with his amber-capped cane.

"—drivin' around," Hugo finished without either pausing or changing expression. "But that was hours ago."

"Where was this?" Ez asked, giving Brimstone a dark look.

"Down the road a bit. I knew I shoulda made her let me drive her back," he added, frowning ominously. "I could show ya better than I can describe it. Everything out here kinda all looks the same."

Brimstone looked from Hugo to Ez and back again, and then settled his hat more firmly on his head. "Well, by all means, accompany the Professor on his errand of would-be rescue, just as soon as you've finished packing away my bones."

Hugo started heading for Ez's truck. "She was pretty upset. I shoulda never left her. We just broke up," he added glumly. "She took it pretty hard."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Just a moment!" Brimstone gasped, and came after them, hand clapped to hat and cane a'wave. "You can't just—Now you just stop right in your commodious tracks, you maladroitness!"

Hugo stopped.

Brimstone marched boldly up to the front side of the hulking Hugo and gave him a thump to the chest with the amber head of his cane. "You and your lymphatic colleague

are in my employ and that means you do not scamper off without my express permission! Surely the gurk!"

This time, it was Hugo's hand that went out and he didn't bother with the cravat. His fingers closed without any hesitation around Brimstone's throat. To Ez's eyes, it looked as though they even met around the back. Hugo continued to stand, head bent, gaze serenely directed down at the sand, and by all appearances deep in thought and utterly removed from the man floundering at the end of his arm. At last, he sighed and said, "Listen."

Brimstone assumed a profound and purpled aspect of attention.

"You're the Boss, and I respect that," Hugo explained. "But my girl could be hurt. And even if we ain't gettin' married anymore, that don't mean I'm gonna let her wander around lost and hurt and stuff. A gentleman don't do that." He raised his head and met Brimstone's now-bugging eyes without blinking. "And a gentleman shouldn't ought to tell another guy he should."

"Wouldn't think of it," scratched the Doctor.

Hugo released him, stepped around the black puddle he made as he sagged to the ground, and let himself into the passenger side of Ez's truck.

"All right then." Brimstone straightened his hat and brushed dust from his cape without a fastidious marred somewhat by his still being sprawled on the desert floor. "Go forth and aid our intrepid associate in the fetching of his erstwhile assistant. But keep in mind the necessity of our

expedient withdrawal from these environs and return the instant our wandering Miss Payne is firmly in hand."

Very firmly in hand, if Ez had anything to say about it. He hopped up behind the wheel and turned the key he'd left in the ignition, thinking the sort of thoughts that made a fella's spanking hand start to itch.

"Yeah, Boss." Hugo's voice was heavy with thuggish distress as he pulled his door shut. He even tossed Rocky a wave as the truck pulled out and headed for the road, but then he only slumped mountainously in his chair and looked grim.

"It's all right," Ez said. Not because he was so calm about all this as much as he just really wanted not to be sharing this very small space with an unsettled goon.

"Yeah." Hugo's hand rose to rub at his sloping brow. "I knew I shoulda made her get in the car," he muttered. "I shoulda just *made* her."

"We'll find her," Ez said, and tried to ignore the ominous little twinge that rolled through him at this declaration, the first spoken admittance that Kasia might actually need finding. "Just gear it down, fella. It won't help her to have us panic."

"I ain't panicking, I'm pissed." Hugo said this with a matter-of-factness that utterly belied the meaning of his words. "I shoulda put her in the car, but since I didn't, *she* shoulda followed the road back. If she's gone into the desert..."

He didn't finish that. He didn't really have to. All around them was desert, rising and falling and baking in the sun. Red

sand and brown mountains and the occasional chunk of paradoxical wood as white as bone. It was a whole lot of nothing to get lost in.

Hugo rubbed at his protruding forehead again, his jaw clenching with a sinewy creak. He said, quite calmly, "This is one of them things ya been spankin' her for, ain't it?"

Eesh. Ez was suddenly, acutely aware that Hugo outweighed him by about eight hundred pounds and might just consider Ez responsible for the welfare of his recent ex-fiancé. Cautiously, he said, "Well ... yeah. It's one of her rules not to wander off."

One of the first rules, even. A rule she had always seemed to sincerely appreciate, even when she'd shown open contempt for the others. She was no slouch at hard survival; she had to know how dangerous it was to go off on her own, especially when he was asleep at the time.

"And she done it anyway," Hugo said, uncannily picking up the threads of Ez's thoughts. "Smart broad like her and everythin'." He stared away out the window for a while before idly asking, "Are ya mad at her?"

Ez could feel his skin tighten up a little. Hugo wasn't looking at him—the sunken eyes were roving freely over the desert landscape—but his fingers were curling and curling with hypnotic effect. In the back of his mind, he could still see the way Brimstone's head had protruded cartoon-like from out of that gargantuan fist. All the same, it was always best to answer truthfully when confronted with a goon. Fear and lies, goons can smell 'em.

"Not exactly," he said. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't upset, though. But first I need to get her back. Then I'll figure out whether or not I'm mad at her."

"Ya gonna spank her?"

"Not while I'm mad at her."

Hugo grunted, all his attention seemingly focused outside of the truck. At last, he shook his head. "I still don't hold with hittin' girls," he said. "But I'm startin' to see why you'd do it this time."

"I haven't done it yet," Ez pointed out.

"Yeah, but you're gonna," Hugo replied, and then flexed one hand, producing a string of muted firecracker pops and added, "And if ya don't, I will."

And as upset as Ez was, his heart went out just a little to his misplaced assistant. Those hands were huge. "I think," he said tactfully, "that's the sort of thing that's best left to the experienced."

"Yeah, probably." Hugo flexed his hand again, unoffended. "I wouldn't wanna bust nothing."

"It's nice that you're concerned, though. Not everyone is so considerate after a break-up."

"We was right up there," Hugo said, pointing, and then he leaned back in his chair and scratched thoughtfully at his chin. "Yeah, I dunno what happened. It seemed like we was gettin' on so well, ya know?" He straightened up suddenly and turned around, closing his hand alarmingly around Ez's entire forearm. "Ya don't think she run off 'cuz of me?" he asked, clearly stricken by the thought.



"No," Ez said soothingly. He couldn't feel his fingers. "No, I'm sure you let her down easy."

"I musta done." Hugo glanced away, a touch of bewilderment leaking onto the vast plain of his features. "I didn't even know I was doin' it myself until it got done."

Yep, that sounded like Kasia all right. "Well," he said, giving his trapped arm a few discreet tugs. "I suppose we ought to have a look around."

Hugo frowned at him, then seemed to notice the arm still in his grip. He let go and Ez felt the blissful sensation of blood returning to his constricted limb. "Sorry," mumbled the minion.

"No problem." Ez gave his hand a few shakes to make sure everything worked and then got out of the truck. A quick scan of the surrounding area showed him nothing. He tried the old cup-and-hollar again, and still there was no reply. When he glanced around, Hugo was looming behind him, implacably waiting for orders.

Yeah, he supposed he'd really ought to have a plan. It wouldn't do anyone any good to have all three of them wandering lost in the desert. Unfortunately, unless digging for fossils was involved, planning really wasn't Ez's strong suit. On the other hand, it was unlikely that Hugo was a master of strategy in a damned good disguise, so that left Ez in the driver's seat.

Driver's seat. Hm.

"Hop up in back," Ez said, indicating the bed of the truck. "I'll drive. Give me a bang if you see her."

"Yeah Boss." Hugo swung a leg over the side of the bed.

"And Hugo?"

The minion paused. "Yeah?"

"When you do that banging ... try not to cave in the roof and kill me."

Hugo looked neither offended nor amused nor even surprised by this request. "Got it," he said simply, and climbed on up.

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## Chapter Twelve

Kasia sat in the dust on the shady side of a boulder and read the letters on the side of her plaster-wrapped skull over and over. B1-10-13-3409EE. Truly a portentous and ennobling statement for all mankind. She found more and more hidden meanings in it the longer she read. She was hot. Sweat was a greasy film cocooning her entire body, but she wasn't thirsty anymore. That helped.

It was important to keep your wits about you in situations like this. Important to remember that a lost person should stay in one place and wait to be found. Important to remember to conserve one's energy and not walk around. Important to remember that dust devils don't really eat people. They ate tofu and sprouts. One of them had said so. And who could you trust if you couldn't trust a dust devil?

You just had to keep your sense of perspective, that was all. This was serious. She couldn't afford to focus in on petty things. For example, it was all Hugo's fault that Kasia was now lost in the Utah desert, but did she hate him? Heck, no. So what if he'd taken the wrong jacket, thus forcing her to chase after him? So what if he'd taken so much time to succumb to her dis-engagement bickering that she'd had to run back overland? Life was too short to get bogged down in the blame game.

Waaay too short. Shorter every minute, in fact.

No, don't even think it. She couldn't be that far from camp. The Professor would find her. He'd find her and he'd

scold her and he'd spank her, and then he'd saddle up one of these talking cactuses and they'd ride down to Starvation for cheeseburgers and slushies. Yee-haw.

Cactuses, no less. Kasia watched them cavorting and giggling in the distance as she sat by her onesome in the shade. She had no idea heatstroke and dehydration could really affect a brain like this. Really, this was ridiculous. There were no cactuses at this altitude in Utah.

"Why can't I be hallucinating something more meaningful?" she asked out loud. Her voice sounded scratchy and tired.

"Like what?" asked the skull in her lap. Its voice, too, was scratchy, as well as muffled by the layers of burlap and plaster wrapping it, but at least it was pretty perky.

"I don't know. Something." She thought about it and laughed a little. "How about some winning lottery numbers? That'd be nice."

"I think you're confusing hallucinations with precognition."

"Could be. I get those two confused a lot." There was sweat dripping from the tip of her nose onto the plaster, making a muddy kind of swamp over some of the numbers she was reading. Kasia wiped her hand down her face, but that didn't feel a whole lot better. "Hey," she said. "You know what I'm wishing for right now?"

"Roller skates?"

"Besides that."

"G'head."

"I wish Ez would come right over that ridge over there and come and get me." Kasia stared at the ridge in question

hopefully, but it remained perversely empty. She sighed and dropped her eyes dejectedly to the fossil jacket in her hands. "I've ruined everything."

"No self-disparaging remarks, isn't that one of your rules?"

"Yeah, but what are you going to do about it? You've got no hands." Kasia laughed again. It had a cracked, cackley quality that she didn't like. She stopped.

The sun was making a sound now, like the low humming of power lines. A droning, insectile, alien, awful sound. It was the only thing Kasia could hear, apart from the cactuses. She looked out over the desert and saw thousands and thousands of miles of empty. There were hills and there were highlights and shadows, but the keyword for this particular search engine was still empty. As in lifeless. As in all alone. As in no rescue.

"You know what I miss?" she asked glumly.

"Mystery Science Theatre 3000," the skull said, just as sadly.

"Besides that. I miss feeling homesick. I don't really remember what it feels like to have a real home. There's been a few times, in Georgia, you know, when I felt like I was coming home after work and stuff. But I never got homesick after I had to leave. I felt something, all right, but it was more like, you know, resentment."

"Uh huh." The skull understood.

"Working here the last few weeks has been weird." Kasia shifted to keep herself in the slowly creeping shadow of the rock. She was somewhat out of breath when she resettled, but that didn't seem to be as important as explaining her

thought. "It's made me feel like that again. Maybe not like I *am* home ... but more like I could have one. And who knows what could have happened? He was going to take me to China. Who knows where that could have led? I could have been pretty good at the whole girlfriend-thing. I don't mind if he comes home smelling like plaster."

"Plaster's a good smell," agreed the skull. And it should know, being encased in some.

"I screwed it all up," she said. The humming sun made shimmers appear and disappear over the hardpan. These were the oases that cartoon characters were always trying to swim in when they got lost in the desert. Kasia felt no urge to swim. She may be lost in the desert, but she was holding it together. "I just wish I had a second chance," she told the skull.

"Me, too," said the skull. "Gosh, if only I could go back in time knowing what I know now. Knowing, for example, that my den in the side of the riverbank was perhaps not such a great place to wait out a raging flashflood."

"Yeah, but you'd still be dead now."

"So will you in a hundred sixty million years, cut me some slack!" The skull gave an irritated sniff before re-gathering its calm. "It still mattered at the time."

"You've got a point," Kasia said, chagrined.

"Unfortunately, in the real world, you don't get do-overs." The skull was silent for a while, reflecting on this. At last, it said, "But every once in a while, you *do* get a chance you don't deserve to try and recover from a bad mistake. Taking responsibility for our actions and accepting the consequences

that come of them is a big first step towards self-improvement. And that's what life is all about, you know? Not being a good person all the time, but trying all the time to be a better one."

"That'd sure be nice. If I got out of this, I just know I could be such a better person." She stopped to square herself in the shade again. It took a lot longer this time, and it was a losing battle anyway. It was coming onto noon out there; the shade was melting out from underneath her. "I don't mean I'd be a priest or anything," she continued. "Ez—that's Professor Esben—"

"Mm-hm."

"He was trying to help me." Kasia heaved a sigh and rubbed listlessly at her knee. "He was trying to help me in a lot of ways. Mostly, I think he was just trying to show me that I deserved better than I was giving myself."

"He sounds like a great guy."

"He is. And he's been helping me a lot. But I could still be better."

"How so?"

"Well ... I could do things to improve myself."

"Such as?" the skull persisted.

"I could stop swearing so much. I've already started doing that." Kasia considered the matter carefully. "I could make friends, maybe stop being such a bitch all the time for no reason. I could swallow some of my pride and actually sign up for some programs so I wouldn't have to move around so much. I could learn decoupage."

"Useful."

"Yeah, the field's wide open. But I kind of have to live first." Kasia held the skull up to eye level. "I don't suppose you could jog out and get help for me, could you?"

"My jogging days are over, hon, but I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate it." Kasia put the skull down at her hip and tried once more to squee-gee her face free of moisture. "Does it hurt to die?"

No answer from the skull.

Well, duh. It was a fossil.

Kasia resettled herself against the boulder and tried to still her mind. She was so hot. It made her skin feel crispy, even here in the diminishing shade. Her limbs felt heavy, rooted into the stony ground. It was just as well that she'd decided to sit here and (die) wait to be found, because she didn't think she was capable of walking anymore.

And all because she hadn't wanted to wake Ez up. All because she just had to do things her own way. All because she didn't want a spanking.

Well, there was something tombstone-worthy: She successfully avoided her spanking.

If Ez would only show up to save her, she'd strip down right her and throw herself over this very boulder.

She closed her eyes and damned if she couldn't feel it—the rough rock under her hands, even though she knew her palms were turned up on her own lap. She could feel a breeze on her bare bottom, the same bottom that was snugly-cased in denim and seated square on the ground.

It wasn't a very pleasant fantasy, but an oddly comforting one. She smiled, letting the strange tactile illusions keep lying



to her. It wasn't real and she knew that, but heck, she knew fossils couldn't talk and that hadn't stopped her from enjoying a nice conversation with one.

The first swat fell (the slapping sound of it following after, an out-of-sync echo to this phantom assault), blooming warm across her right buttock. The second, the third—soon the swats were overlapping one another, as though she were the focus of three or four punishing hands all at once. She could feel no pain, of course, but heat was easy for her mind to manufacture with the sun burning down for inspiration, and so heat there was, scathing across an ever-wider area of her dreaming body.

She could hear, blowing faintly in and out of cohesion, Ez's voice doing his Professor-thing: "You brought this on yourself, Miss Payne. I gave you very simple, very reasonable rules, which you agreed to."

Yes, she had, and yes, she deserved this. She deserved to feel all four of his hands battering down on her unprotected backside. She deserved to hear those smacks landing faster (and presumably harder) all over her naked bottom. She deserved the flaring heat and stinging flush that spread like hellish taffy across her throbbing nates. She'd messed up. She'd been a bad girl. She needed to be punished.

The whole time she dozed in the uncomfortable grip of her fantasy, she knew it wasn't the spanking she really wanted, it was the feeling of safety and forgiveness that came after. But her stubborn mind could not allow her to have one without first going through the other, and she had a lot of stupid to make up for. She understood that, accepted it. She let herself

go, relaxing under the barrage in a way she'd never be able to do if it was real. Ez was a soft touch in a lot of ways, but not when it came to spankings.

The ghostly paddling cycled on and on, peppering her bottom until it blazed out with uniform heat, and then addressing itself to her thighs. And unreal as it was, she still squirmed, and squirming still made these insubstantial flares burn brighter. She could hear Ez's voice warning her not to struggle, and she tried to obey, but it was hard. The spanking she wasn't really having just kept coming and there wasn't anything she could do to stop it. Even if she did have the energy to writhe around and fight him off, well, he wasn't actually there, now was he? None of which stopped the hands from cracking down over and over and over.

Finally, with one last blistering smack, ghost-Ez's whispery voice told her she could straighten up but no rubbing. It was getting harder and harder to hear him; he was drifting away, leaving her alone with the searing afterglow of a non-spanking warming her backside. She felt bad to know he was going, but not too bad. This was the point at which she'd have to stand and think about what she'd done, anyway. Maybe later, after her brain had a rest, she'd be able to conjure him back up to finish the job. With that awful ping-pong paddle, perhaps. And then he could finally hold her, tell her it was all right, all over, all forgiven.

Kasia opened her eyes and watched the shadow of the rock behind her crawling up her jeans, exposing more and more of her legs to the sunlight. She knew she wasn't supposed to rub, but there were no rules against shadow-

watching. Heck, if Ez were here for real, he'd probably be making shadow-puppets to help her pass her corner time. With effort, she could even make herself see a few—an elephant, a barking dog, a hopping bunny, a moose doing backflips on a trampoline—but when she blinked, they were gone again. If only Ez were here, he could make more.

Kasia's imagination promptly provided her with the blurry silhouette of Professor Esben striding toward her over a ridge. She watched him come bemusedly. She was really bad at this hallucinating thing. It hardly looked anything like him. All his hair was spiky and unbrushed and his clothes looked like they'd just been thrown on and rolled around in.

"I didn't rub," she said, as Ez came closer. She thought he'd praise her for that, but he didn't say a word. He pulled her to her feet and into an embrace that felt so horribly, heart-breakingly real that Kasia broke into tearless sobs. "I wish you were here!" she wailed. "I should have let Hugo drive me back!"

"Yeah, ya really shoulda," Hugo's voice rumbled, right on cue.

"I'm so sorry," Kasia wept, turning her sunburned face into the comforting crook of Ez's throat. "I sent the skull for help but he'll never find you! I screwed up."

"You're safe now," Ez told her. "Let's get you to the truck."

"Aren't you supposed to finish my spanking?"

"Maybe later."

Her world swirled around her and she was limp in his arms when it was done, carried like a child. Her hallucination, taking on an unreasonably romantic tone. No way could the

Professor carry her any stretch of distance in this heat. It had been all he could manage to carry her into the tent the other night, and he'd dropped her on the cot then.

"Urk," said Ez, almost the same instant this thought finished staggering through her brain. "On second thought, you take her and I'll take the fossil."

And then it was Hugo who had her—that great rock of an ex-fiancé—holding her complacently and as easily as if she were made of feathers. Even his broad, clay-like face filled her with wistfulness. She cupped his neck and pressed her chapped lips to his cheek in a dizzy expression of unclear emotion. "You're the best goon I've ever met," she said.

"Aw," he said, blushing. "I get by."

Kasia closed her eyes as he started walking. This was a very nice fantasy. She hoped the skull came through with help pretty soon.

\* \* \* \*

The hospital whisked Kasia away almost the same instant Ez brought her through the doors and replied to his hesitant query as to when he might go up and see her with a firm, "Tomorrow morning." Hugo was all for laying waste to the E.R. and offered quite seriously to wrap a stretcher around the admitting nurse's neck, but Ez managed to cool him off by sending him over to the gift shop to pick out some flowers to send up to Kasia's room. The next thing he did (anticipating Kasia's instinct to tie her sheets together and escape out the window once she realized where she was) was give the B.Y.U. a call and have her placed on some emergency insurance.

Deputy Doug was only too happy to comply, once Ez said the magic words, "accident occurred on the job" and combined them with the words, "she's the one who found the unidentified bones." Then, seeing as how there was nothing else to do, he took himself and his goon-of-the-day back to their respective camps.

It was a long afternoon and an even longer night, but Ez was there the very instant that visiting hours opened up the next day. He picked up a little bunch of flowers from the gift shop and went upstairs to find her unplugged and sitting up in bed, still a little raw-looking in places, but more or less back to her usual self.

"I don't care what people say," were her first words to him. "This food is fantastic."

Ez set his diminutive bouquet down next to the enormous plush panda bear holding the balloons and the three dozen red roses that Hugo had apparently got for her (the panda was wearing a t-shirt on which block letters had been painstakingly laid out to read: THAT WAS REELY DUM. GET WELL SOON.) and pulled the visitor's chair around so that he could sit. "Okay," he said. "Not a word, Miss Payne. There's something we need to deal with."

"Right." Kasia put her half-eaten waffle down with a firm hand and pushed her table tray away. She flung back her sheet, got up and turned around, presenting him with the view only a hospital johnnie could give when a woman was dressed from neck to knees—a very fetching bottom, chastely packaged in Kasia's torn cotton panties.

"No," Ez said, but not until he'd taken adequate pause for reflection. "We're not doing that until I can do it without worrying about nurses popping in to check your blood pressure."

"Oh. Good thinking." Kasia turned back around and sat down on the side of the bed. She looked very solemn. "Just as long as you know that I know that it's coming."

"And I appreciate your enthusiasm, but—"

"Oh, hey! It's on!" Kasia's eyes had drifted up to the television set over Ez's head and now she grabbed for the controller hanging off her headboard and brought sound swooping into the room.

"Whatever it is, it can wait," Ez began. "I've got to—"

"I would like to welcome you all to this, the unveiling of my crowning achievement, my—dare I say it?—legacy to the field of paleontological discovery."

That voice.

Ez swung around and there he was, Dr. Damien Brimstone, looking twice as tall and ten pounds heavier on the little screen. He was dressed in his very best blacks, his mustache combed and neatly curled, and his round face positively beaming with evil. Hugo and Rocky, Easter Island statues in suits, had been strategically placed off to the sides of the stage that the Doctor occupied, presumable so that they could keep the throngs of four reporters from swamping the podium. On a small table to one side of the Doctor, lay a very familiar plaster jacket with the words "NEW SKULL" neatly penned in Kasia's handwriting on the side.

"Gosh, he didn't lose much time," he remarked, watching flashbulbs sparkle over Brimstone's triumphantly-shining face.

"Nope," Kasia said gleefully. "Not much."

Together, they watched Brimstone wax loquaciously rhapsodic before the increasingly restless group of reporters and cameramen, until he finally began to wind down.

"And so, without further ado, I present to you for your edification and amazement, the unveiling of the first specimen of—" A loving pause, a steeling breath. "—Damius Brimstonasaurus REX!"

Hugo shuffled forward to present the Doctor with an oscillating saw, and for the next few minutes, they were treated to the whine of a motor, clouds of plaster dust, and just the edges of a flapping opera cape behind it. That and the sound of a cameraman muttering, "Brimstonasaurus Rex?" and the brief hup onscreen which indicated whoever was filming this had shrugged.

Kasia's hand reached out and Ez took it without conscious thought and squeezed. He was vaguely aware that he was grinning, anticipating the wonderful moment to come.

This moment.

Brimstone peeled apart the halves of jacket as through they were eggshells and peeked inside. His expression of glorious expectation froze.

A few more flashes popped off. The dust settled at dust's lazy speed. Someone coughed. Brimstone's mustache twitched and he looked up sharply. One could almost see the explanations he was frantically trying on and throwing out,

like the dresses of a high-strung girl on the night before her first dance.

Whoever was holding the camera apparently got tired of waiting. The image on the screen rose up and then angled sharply down, so that viewers the whole world over (if the whole world were watching Channel Eight) could see the pink plastic dinosaur imbedded on its side in the plaster.

"So!" Brimstone slammed the top of the jacket down over the bottom and clapped his hands briskly. "Yes, well. That concludes this conference. Gentlemen ... good day!" He fled in a swoop of cape.

Ez burst out laughing as Kasia switched the TV off again. "Okay," he said, wiping at his eyes. "Okay, that was worth it, but now—"

The door opened and a young man came in with a clipboard and some papers, saying, "All righty, Miss Payne, time for you to hit the road!"

"Great!" Kasia scribbled her name across the forms he gave her, took her bag of clothes from him when he presented them, and started dressing the second he was out of the room. "I can't wait to get out of here. I mean, the food's great and all that, but they've got this pathological obsession with sticking things in you."

They walked together to the elevator and then out of the building, Kasia holding Ez's little bunch of flowers, and Ez lugging Hugo's enormous panda party platter and all accouterments. She was chirping away the whole time, recounting her adventures alone in the desert, and putting a particular emphasis on a lengthy conversation she'd



apparently held with the actual object of Brimstone's larcenous affections. "I realize it was a hallucination," she was saying as she buckled herself into the truck. "I even realized it then, but he just made so much sense!"

He let her keep talking as he buckled the panda in between them and started up the truck. He let her keep talking until the city was behind them and the road turned into a ribbon of empty reaching out into the desert. And when they were alone, when no distractions of any kind could possibly present themselves...

"So there I was in Kazakhstan!" Ez said loudly.

Kasia startled, and then threw him a sour smile and folded her hands demurely in her lap. "Go ahead," she said gently.

"I'm going to finish it this time," he warned her.

"I'm all ears."

"It was my first dig," Ez began. "The very first that I was in charge of, anyway, and it was one of the most important finds of the century. A road crew in Kazakhstan had unearthed the fossilized ribs and vertebrae of a huge dinosaur, one they suspected might have belonged to a T-Rex, which would have made it the first T-Rex ever found in that part of the world. I, along with some of the biggest names in paleontology, flew out to Kazakhstan to have a look at the find, which was, in a word, spectacular. We were in the middle of nowhere. Nothing but dirt and rain and miles of empty all around us, and there, at the end of this rough, unpaved road was half a hill with a mud puddle in front of it and these huge blackened shapes rising out of it. It was breath-taking, Miss Payne."

She nodded, still looking very patient.

"The exposed bones are contorted and pitted and eroded, but they're still articulated, which often suggests that more of the skeleton is attached, so we went to work. We spent the first week just cleaning up the site, shoring up the sides of the construction pit and slogging through the mud up to our armpits, and the rain never stopped falling. I was having the time of my life."

"And you were watching out for snakes," Kasia interjected.

"Yes, I was," he said, pleased that she'd remembered.

"The second week, we built this massive derrick that we could support the exposed bones and keep them articulated and suspended while we started our excavations. The greatest hands in paleontology cleaned those bones and wrapped them in protective plaster, and then we began to dig."

"With paintbrushes and toothbrushes and ostrich feathers," Kasia said.

"In the mud and the snakes and the rain," Ez said reverently. "And the skeleton was still attached and it was still articulated, but it was all cemented together in such a way that we were afraid we'd damage it if we tried to separate the bones. So there was nothing for us to do but wrap up the whole thing at once and move it to a facility where the working conditions were better. And after three weeks of excavations and painstaking effort, I happened to notice markings on the sides of one of the bones I was wrapping. Were they the marks of teeth from some ferocious rival T-Rex battle? No. Were they the signs of a broken leg just beginning to heal before the untimely demise of this prodigious beast."

No. Heck, were they marks left by the road crew's bulldozer during some careless roadwork? Not even."

Kasia was waiting, her arms folded across her chest and her head cocked to betray some interest.

Ez said, "They were letters. Specifically, they were words. In English. J-O-H-N-D-E-E-R-E."

Silence. Kasia was frowning at him. At last, she said, "It was a tractor?"

"It wasn't just a tractor," he told her. "It was a tractor and a cast-iron thresher."

She didn't laugh. In fact, her frown deepened. "Boss, no offense, but how could you possibly mistake a tractor for a T-rex even once, let alone every day for three weeks?"

"Well, see, it was—"

"The greatest minds in paleontology? Dang, fella, didn't the *paint* raise your alarms just a little?"

"It had all rusted off."

"Well, wasn't that a clue? How many bones do you know that rust?" Kasia stopped there and rubbed at her eyes with an expression of grim patience stamped over her features. "Okay," she said seriously. "I promised the skull that I'd be a better person, so I'm not going to tell you what I really think about you wasting all that time and effort and money digging up a tractor halfway across the globe."

"How considerate," Ez muttered, flexing his fingers on the steering wheel.

"I mean, it's obvious that you've made up for it in the rest of your career." Kasia looked down the road to the distant twinkle of sunlight on their trailer. "You made improvements

in the way you handled your future digs so you couldn't make a mistake like that again, right?"

"The skull told you this?"

"No, but he did tell me that being a better person means taking responsibility for my dumb mistakes."

"Huh. You don't usually see that kind of philosophical exploration in things without a brain."

"I guess having a hundred and sixty million years to sit around and think makes you more introspective," she said with a shrug. "The point is, the skull was right. There are no do-overs in real life and if you're lucky enough to get the chance to make up for the stupid stuff, then you should welcome it and the consequences. You should learn from it, because life is about the journey, not the destination."

"I have really got to have a sit-down with this skull someday," Ez remarked, and pulled into camp. "So," he said, taking the keys from the ignition. "We've got a lot to do before the B.Y.U.'s new crew shows up, but I guess you know what's first."

"Coffee and chili mac?" But she winked as she said it, and slid down from the cab already unzipping her jeans. By the time she'd come around to his side of the truck, she had her shoes in her hand and her jeans slung over her arm. "Where do you want me?"

He'd intended to put her over the generator, but she looked so cute there in her bare feet and cotton panties that he just had to have her over his knee. Ez opened up the tailgate and hopped up, patting his thigh invitingly.

And she came her, bless her little heart! Came and set her clothes neatly-folded to one side before she draped herself bottom up over his lap. When Ez hooked a finger into the back of her panties, she raised her hips to allow him to slide them easily off. He gave the exposed globes, pale and perfect and lightly blushed with the residue of her last spanking, a reassuring rub and she drew in a steeling breath, her hands gripping hard at his ankle.

"This isn't going to be an easy one," Ez said.

"It shouldn't be," she replied. "Go on."

"You really are my good girl," Ez told her fondly, and swung.

This was a punishment and it was a serious one. He did not warm her up, but made himself start out as hard as he had ever done. Kasia's hips bumped forward with every crack of his hand, but she didn't really struggle. Her legs kicked and her hands fisted and clawed, but she wasn't fighting him. She even tried to make herself relax for him; although her buttocks clenched protectively taut after every hard swat, he never had to tell her to loosen up before the next one fell.

Once he had her bottom blazing red, he both slowed and strengthened his smacks, letting his words fall in the spaces between: "Never again, Miss Payne." Smack smack smack. "You are too smart a woman to ever—" SMACK! "—do something so foolish—" SMACK! "Again." Smack smack smack. "I don't know what mental hiccup allowed you to run off like that—" Smack smack smack. "—in the first place, but you knew better, Miss Payne—" Smack smack smack. "—and I am going to make sure you remember—" SMACK SMACK!

"—how this feels—" SMACK SMACK! "—for the rest of your life!" SMACK SMACK SMACK!

She was howling by the end of it, but she was trying to nod, trying to agree with him from an unguessed-at well of agony. Ez threaded one leg around hers to keep them from their frenzied kicks and went to work on her thighs. She folded almost instantly, sobbing so hard she scarcely made any sound at all, but she was still nodding, still trying to show him her willingness, her submission.

He was proud of her, and as he finally stopped swinging, he let his hand move lovingly over her, rubbing and massaging as she writhed. He could feel the heat he'd put in her sizzling up against his palm. He could practically feel the throbbing as well. She cried helplessly, hugging his leg, and he petted her pain-smoothed flesh and waited.

At last, she stirred, wiping at her eyes. "Are we done?" she wept brokenly. "We're not, are we?"

"No, we're not. But nearly." Ez helped her to her feet and turned her so that her hands were flat on the tailgate and her bottom out-thrust. "What I want," he said gently, "is for you to tell me how we're going to finish."

Kasia's face buckled. She bent, taking breath after shuddery breath, and finally said, "With the paddle."

He went to get it, and by the time he returned, she'd mostly composed herself. "Okay," he said, setting the paddle at her hand where she couldn't help but see it. "How many?"

All Kasia's hard-won self-possession fell apart as she broke into fresh tears. Ez waited, his fingers lightly stroking her red, round bottom.

"Twenty," she whispered.

His hand paused before resuming its tender motions. It was a high number. Higher than he'd have chosen. But it was her guilt and trust was a two-way street. "All right," he said, and picked up the paddle. "You're going to count them."

She groaned, but she nodded and he saw the muscles of her back and shoulders roll as she tried to brace herself.

CRACK! Even a light tap with a paddle was a hard thing to bear after a solid hand spanking. Her cry rang out piercingly before folding into sobs, but at the end of it, was, "One."

His good girl. He let the paddling build one brave count at a time, going easy at first, although she might not have known it. He aimed the paddle precisely, first one cheek and then the other, overlapping each blow to slowly bring her color back to brilliance. He had to stop at ten for her to catch her breath and her courage again. He stopped again at fifteen, knowing that each blow after that would be worse than the one before.

Sixteen struck high on her right nate. Seventeen, on her left. Eighteen hit her on her tender right sit-spot, sending Kasia forward in screams before she could make her count. Nineteen finished her sit-spot on the left. And twenty, swung with nearly Ez's fullest force, caught her right in the center, flattening her buttocks with white before scarlet scoured out anew.

But then it was all over, and although it took Kasia several minutes of clutching and shaking to regain her self-control, it eventually ended with her arms around his neck and her tears dampening his shirt front.

"You are always going to be there for me, aren't you?" she whispered. It was not a real question, but a soft, wondering statement of fact.

Ez smiled. "That's the plan."

"The skull said you were a great guy."

"I am. Fossils don't lie, Miss Payne."

She started crying again. Not tears of guilt or pain, but the outpouring of a lifetime spent lost and unhappy that she'd buried inside her, now broken open at last. He held her, rocked her, stroked her hair. He told her it was all right over and over, and he knew by the way she hugged him that she believed it. Her misery and loneliness had been pulled out into the sunlight to burn away and she could start over fresh.

"With you," she said, holding him tighter.

"With me," he agreed. And if she had anything else buried inside her, he'd deal with that when the time came. There was nothing he did better than digging up old bones.