

Death by Dinosaur Bone?

— 1 —

Jack stepped out of his old Land Rover and stretched. The crisp, dry late morning air was so unlike the sultry summer days he'd left behind in Ohio. He glanced at the weathered storefront of the Piñon Mesa Café. The door looked as if it were loose on its hinges. The ramshackle building itself appeared to suffer from years of neglect.

An old-style newspaper box had been placed awkwardly outside, its yellow paint, smudged and peeling. Jack sauntered up to it, dropped a quarter in the slot, and noisily pulled down the latch to remove a copy of the *Grand Junction Gazette*. The headlines read: 'Death By Dinosaur Bone?'

He folded the paper, tucked it under his arm, and returned to lock the car door. When he glanced back at the café, he heard the words of his grandfather: "*Scratch the surface of any small town in America and you'll find both good and evil.*"

Inside, a pungent, heavy smell of hot grease permeated the room. Jack took a seat at a booth by the front window. An unsmiling, somewhat haggard-looking, middle-aged woman took his order.

He spread the newspaper out on the table before him and began to read the lead article:

FRUITA, CO.

On Sunday, the bodies of two young adults, one male and one female, were discovered at an archeological site, where an excavation sponsored by the Dinosaur Journey Museum of Fruita, Colorado, was underway. The two, identified as Susan Wallace, 19, and Sydney Arthur, 18, had participated in the dig on Friday. Police say the bodies were discovered by the paleontologists leading the team of volunteers, when they returned to the site in preparation for a continuation of the dig on Monday. The cause of the deaths is still under investigation, but appears to be due to severe head injuries that both victims suffered.

Alongside the bodies were scattered bone fragments from a dinosaur, thought to be from the late Jurassic period some 150 million years ago. A portion of what was identified as the femur from the dinosaur, measuring four feet in length and weighing approximately fifty pounds, was lying near the bodies. Police indicated that blood stains were present on the bone, and have since confirmed that the blood type matched those of the victims. Forensic experts on the scene, have suggested that the contours of the bone near the blood stain matched the head injuries and was likely

the cause of death. Police are treating the deaths as homicides, and are continuing to examine the evidence for possible clues as to who may have committed the crimes.

The waitress returned with Jack's order. "Here ya go."

"Thanks!"

"Ya readin' that story 'bout the dinosaur-bone killin' o' those two kids?" Jack nodded. "Ain't that some-thin'? I don't know what gits into people's minds."

"Did you know those kids?"

"Nah. They may o' come here fer breakfast once or twice. Can't be sure. We git a lot o' 'em. Crazy kids! They pay money ta go out there in the hot sun and dig away with little knives and toothbrushes to find old bones. Don't make no sense ta me."

"You been here long?"

"Born in Grand Junction. I thought one day I'd git out, but I got married. Had a kid. Then, that bum I married run off. So, I gotta stay here and raise her. Probably good that he left though. He was a rat. Drank. Always gittin' in fights. And he'd beat me around when he got real drunk. Never touched the kid. But I couldn' think he'd not do it ta her too, when she got a little older. Good riddens ta 'im." She looked down at Jack. "Ya married?"

"No."

"Ya wantin' ta git married?"

“No.”

She tapped her forehead with her index finger. “Ya got some smarts up there, then!” Jack smiled at her and continued with his breakfast. “Where ya from?”

“Ohio.”

“Y’re a long way from home.”

“Yeah.” He pushed his dish away from him and pulled his coffee cup toward him. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to continue this one-way conversation. He took a sip and looked up at her, still standing there. “How are the jobs around here?”

“Ain’t none. Not really. Why? Ya lookin’ fer work?”

“Well, I’m always on the lookout for work that strikes my fancy.”

“Ha! ‘Strikes yer fancy’ ya say?! Ha! Ya fancy washin’ dishes or short-order cookin’?”

“No. I can’t say that I do.”

“Too bad. We got a need fer someone who’d do both.”

Jack finished his coffee. “Tell me, where is this place where the murder of those two kids happened?”

She stepped away from him, pointing out the window to the north. “Right up that road, ’bout five miles, I’d say.”

When Jack had gotten back into his car and started up the road to the site of the dig, he thought about how much that woman reminded him of Jean, the

little waitress he'd left back in Custer, S.D. Of course, he didn't really know this woman, but both of them seemed trapped in an unhappy existence with no way out. There was a kind of sad, cynical moroseness they shared. And neither had much interest in the world beyond the immediate confines of their daily life.

The archeological site was cordoned off when Jack arrived. He parked his car along side the two-lane highway opposite the site. There were five people inside the yellow tape. Four men and one woman. Two of them appeared to be sheriff's deputies. One of the deputies came up to Jack as he crossed the highway.

"Sorry, this area is a restricted crime scene."

"OK. I just wondered what an archeological dig would look like. I read about it in the paper."

The deputy looked him up and down. "You're not from around here?"

"No. Just passing through." Jack looked beyond the yellow tape into an area that was marked off with stakes and white ribbons. "That's pretty tragic. I mean, killing these young kids."

"Yeah." The deputy looked back over his shoulder. "They're trying to find something that'll help us track down the guy who did this." He looked back at Jack. "How long you been in town?"

"Just arrived this morning. I drove over here from Vail."

"What were you doin' in Vail?"

“Well, it’s a long story. I’ll give you the short version. I was working as a carpenter until the job ran out.”

“What job?”

“They’re building some more condos there.”

“So, you’re out of work?”

“For the moment. I’m heading to California. See what I can find there.”

The deputy looked over at his car and back at Jack. “What’s your name.””

“Jack Smith.”

“Well, ugh, Mr. Smth, we might want to have a talk with ya, before ya leave.”

“About what?”

“Let me just say that we’re looking for who might have killed those two kids. And I don’t think it was someone local. I think it’s probably some drifter looking to steal whatever he can git his hands on. And those kids were easy pickin’s.”

“What?! I just got here!”

“I’ll tell ya *‘what.’* I’m wantin’ ya ta go inta town and get yourself a place to stay for the night, and we’ll talk again tomorrow.”

“I hadn’t planned on staying here tonight.”

“I’m sure you’ll be glad to change your plans.”

“Why don’t we just talk right now? Right here?”

“I have ta wait till the forensic boys are done. If you’re not involved with any o’ this, I’m sure they’ll find some evidence that’ll remove you as a suspect.”

“A suspect?! Are you placing me under arrest?!”

“No. Not just yet.” The deputy took out a note pad and began writing on it. “Whoever did this had ta be a big strong guy.” He tore off a sheet containing the notes he’d just made. “Like you.” He held out the paper. “Here’s the address of a motel down in Fruita. It’s not too expensive, but it’s clean. And I know the owners. Now, I can’t tell ya that you have stay there, but I’d advise it. I’ll be calling to make sure you found it.”

Jack stared at the sheet of paper, and looked up at the deputy’s name tag: *C. T. Jones*.

“Mr. Smith, as I said, you’re not under arrest, just yet.”

“Arrest for what?”

“If it comes to that, it’d be suspicion of murder.”

Jack reached out and took the paper, shaking his head. As he walked back to his car, he watched the deputy take down his license number. *This is unbelievable!* He started the engine, did a U-turn, and headed back down the hill to Fruita.

When Jack entered the motel’s office, he was greeted by an elderly couple seated before a cold fireplace. The man stood up and walked toward him; the woman remained seated, smiling up at Jack. “Hi there!”

“Hi. I was wondering if you have a room?”

“Sure do. Come on over here and we can get ya registered.” He walked behind a desk and pulled out

a log book. “How long ya be stayin’ with us?”

“I can’t say. I hope . . . I mean, maybe just a day or two.”

“Well, that’d be fine.”

Jack signed the book and laid a twenty dollar bill on the counter. “You know a man—a deputy—named C.T. Jones?”

“Charley? Sure we know him. You a friend o’ his?”

“Not exactly. But I think he’s going to be calling for me. Would you be sure to take a message if I’m not here?”

“I sure can. Where will I tell him you’ll be?”

“Oh, I thought I’d go see the Dinosaur Museum. Then, maybe get a bite to eat. You know of a good restaurant in town? Not too expensive?”

“Well, there’s the Piñon Mesa Diner right down the road a piece.”

The same diner where Jack had had breakfast. He didn’t want to go back there and see that waitress again. “Ah, well, I was looking for something, maybe, a restaurant that had something more than diner food.”

The woman spoke up from her chair. “You could try the restaurant in the Buffalo Hotel. If you’d like to try some wild game, they have Elk on the menu. They also have trout, if you’re looking for seafood.”

“OK. Thank you. I’ll give them a try.” He picked up the room key and nodded to the woman as he passed out of the office and back to his car.

Jack walked under the big green awning with signage proclaiming: *Dinosaur Journey Museum*. When he stepped inside, he realized that it was more than a museum. Off to his right was a room partitioned off from the museum proper with a glass enclosure. Behind it was a laboratory. A middle-aged man and a young woman, both in long white lab coats, were busy with a table full of bone fragments.

Immediately before him was an animated Tyrannosaurus Rex baring its teeth. He found himself musing over the childhood fascination with dinosaurs, and he decided to stroll through the museum before attempting to get a word with the paleontologists. The museum was exceptionally well done. The displays had mockups of the dinosaurs in their presumed habitat, with sound accompanying many of the animated exhibits. Descriptions of the creatures, their habits, and where they could have been found during their heyday were posted with each. He spent a full hour taking it all in before returning to the front desk.

“Hi.”

An elderly woman who’d sold him his ticket looked up and nodded with a smile.

“I was wondering if I might be able to speak with one of the paleontologists who works here?”

“What did you want to talk with them about?”

“I was interested in one of their recent digs in the

hills up north of Fruita.”

“Well, I’ll see. There is one paleontologist and an intern here today. Could I get your name?”

“Jack. Jack Smith.”

“Just a moment Mr. Smith.”

“Thank you.”

She soon returned with the two he’d seen in the laboratory. The man was clean-shaven, had short cropped gray hair, and wore glasses with circular lenses. He approached with his hands buried in the pockets of a white lab coat. The young woman had a round Asiatic face, with slightly oval eyes. She trailed behind the man, swinging her long black pony tail as she walked.

“Mr. Smith, this is Dr. Ashcroft.”

“Dr. Ashcroft.”

“And this is our intern, Ms. Wu.”

“Ms. Wu.”

The doctor spoke up. “What can we do for you, Mr. Smith?”

Jack wanted to just be upfront about his confrontation with the deputy at the dig site, but he looked around him. Where they were standing felt too public for that. “Well, uhm . . . I, uh, wanted to ask you a few questions about the archeological dig up north of Fruita. Where those two young kids were found.”

“Are you a journalist?”

“No. No. I’m just passing through on my way to California.” He looked around again as a couple was

leading two young eager children into the building. “Uh, can we go somewhere a little more private?”

The doctor hesitated. “Is this important? Or are you just satisfying your curiosity?”

“I assure you, it’s very important.”

“You’re not with the police or the city?”

“No. As I said, I was just passing through town.”

“OK. This way . . .” And he motioned down a narrow hallway.

They entered the laboratory, and the young intern closed the door behind them. The doctor motioned to a chair. Jack took a seat.

“Now, you said this is important.”

“This is going to sound bizarre . . . I left Vail this morning heading, as I said, for California. I stopped in Fruita to get a late breakfast. And while I was there I read in the paper about those two kids who were apparently murdered at the site of that archeological dig just north of here . . . Now, that did strike me as curious, to be sure . . . So, I drove up there to see what I could see. When I arrived, sheriff’s deputies had the place cordoned off and one of the deputies began questioning me. Before I knew it, he claimed that I was a suspect in the murder! So, you see, it *is* very important.”

The doctor turned away from Jack and paced across the floor to the bench where Jack had first seen them at work from the museum proper. He slowly turned around. “Why did he suspect you?”

“He said that he didn’t believe that the person who killed them was local. A ‘drifter,’ he said, who had to be, in his words, ‘a big guy,’ . . .like me!”

“What do you want from us?”

“I know it’s a long shot. But I want to try to find a way to defend myself. I don’t exactly know where to begin nor what questions to ask. But the deputy suggested that whoever killed those kids was out to steal whatever he could find and that they were easy targets. So, I wondered if you had any idea if anything was taken from the site?”

He saw the doctor glance over at the young intern. She was staring back at the doctor with what appeared to Jack to be a shared, concerned look on her face.

“What?! Do you know something?”

The doctor looked briefly back at Jack, then stared to the floor as he strolled across the room toward him. “Here’s what I told the police. The two who were killed were participating in the dig last Friday. We weren’t working over the weekend, and had scheduled to pick it up again on Monday. Those two apparently decided to go back to the site the next day and do a little unsupervised digging of their own.”

He looked again at his intern and paced back across the room. “Ms. Wu and I went to the site yesterday to decide how we wanted to proceed with the dig. When we arrived, we found the two of them lying there in the middle of the site. We came back to

Fruita and called the sheriff.”

“Did you find any evidence that there was anything taken. I mean anything that could have been valuable enough for someone to commit these crimes?”

“Mr. Smith, I’m afraid I can’t tell you anymore right now.”

“Why not?”

“I was told not to talk to anyone who might let the information get out to the press before the sheriff has had a chance to complete his investigation.”

“So there *is* something more.” Jack looked down at his feet, suppressing his urge to push the doctor for more information. “Let me tell you what I think my situation is right now, as we speak. I have the rest of the day, and maybe tomorrow morning, to figure out how I can avoid arrest for suspicion of murder.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Smith. But I am not authorized to reveal any more information about the dig.” He looked at his intern and then back at Jack. “At least, I cannot say any more right now.”

Jack was exasperated. He stood up and looked the doctor hard in the eye. “OK. Can you give me a hint of where I might look and what I might look for?”

The paleontologist was silent.

“Dr. Ashcroft! At least give me the information about the dig. What did you find out there?”

“OK, Mr. Smith. We believe we may have found a skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. We’ve just begun the excavation, so we don’t know how in tact the

skeleton's remains will be. On Friday, we had just begun to uncover the skull. It was late, and we needed to proceed slowly, so we decided to postpone the dig until Monday.

"Before we left, Ms. Wu and I recovered a tooth that was severed from the jawbone of the skeleton to bring back here to the lab for analysis in order to confirm our suspicion of the species. It was somewhat *pro forma*. We were fairly certain of the find."

"Other than from a scientific point of view, how important is this find?"

"You mean, how much would it be worth?" He walked over to their workbench and picked up the tooth. "This one tooth could be sold at auction for over a thousand dollars. And we may have found a completely in-tact skeleton. If so, it would be worth millions."

"So you think those two kids went back to the site to steal some of the skeletal remains?"

"I don't want to speculate. But I will tell you that, when we went back out to the site on Sunday, the skull of the dinosaur—that we had just beginning to uncover—had gone missing."

Jack looked absently at the dinosaur bones on the work bench. "Who would know of the find?"

"No one really. Other than Ms. Wu and I. We had not confirmed the species . . ."

"But what about the students who were assisting in the dig?"

“On Friday, they did not know what we had discovered. We decided to keep it from them initially until we had a better chance to evaluate it.”

“How many were on the dig when you began uncovering the skull?”

“There were three students, and two adults. And of course Ms. Wu and myself.”

“You’ve given their names to the police?”

“Yes. But I cannot give that information out. I hope you understand. Now, Mr. Smith, I think that’s all I can say. I’ve probably said more than I should have already.”

“Just one last question. You were quoting auction prices for dinosaur bones . . .”

“I was just telling you what they’ve brought at auction in the past.”

“Yes, I see. That means that it’s entirely legal to buy and sell dinosaur bones?”

“Provided you’ve legally acquired them. At least in the U.S. But you cannot sell dinosaur bones that you have found on public lands. And before you ask. Yes, the archeological dig where we’ve found—or believe we’ve found—the skeleton of a T-Rex *IS* on public lands.”

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Jack pulled up a stool at the bar in the Buffalo Hotel. The bartender was a middle-aged man dressed

casually, but with a certain flair. Long wavy, blond hair combed high atop his head and sweeping back along the sides. His large blue eyes bulged slightly from their sockets beneath bushy, blonde eyebrows. His skin was fair; his speech precise; his voice high-pitched.

“What can I get you?”

“I’ll take a draft beer.”

“You’ve got it.” He pulled a beer glass from beneath the bar, and turned to the tap.

“Say, can you order a dinner here, or would I have to go into the dining room?”

“Yes. You can eat here.” He set the glass of beer on a bar napkin in front of Jack, and handed him a menu.

“I hear the elk’s pretty good.”

“It’s a matter of taste. Some people think it’s too gamey.”

“I’ll give it a try. I’ll just take the elk dinner.”

The bartender took the order, walked to the end of the bar, and handed it to a waitress. Jack looked around at the decor. It was studded with images of the old west. Buffaloes were present on nearly every wall, with a stuffed head overlooking the bar. The bartender returned and was busying himself arranging whiskey bottles.

“Say, any need here for a part-time bartender?”

He turned around and looked at Jack. “Well, there may be. You’d have to talk to the boss.” He hesi-

tated. “But I think I’d dress up a little bit first. He’s funny about that.” He walked over to Jack. “Did you just get into town?”

“Yeah. Just this morning.”

“Where are you staying?”

“Right now, in a small motel down the road there.”

“Have you ever tended bar?”

“Yeah. I tended bar in Boulder, Colorado for about a year. And before that in Custer, South Dakota.”

“You get around.”

He smiled. “I guess so. What’d ya know about this sheriff’s deputy, Charley Jones?”

“I know enough not to cross paths with him.”

“How’s that?”

“Let me just say that I think he enjoys wearing that badge . . . You’re not in any trouble, are you?”

Jack didn’t want to go into it. “I don’t think so. I just ran into him up at the archeology dig where those two kids were killed. I was just curious.”

“Well, the boss will be in tomorrow around 4 or 5.”

The waitress returned to the end of the bar balancing a couple of dishes in one hand and along her arm and holding a tray of sauces and spices in her other hand.

“Ah! There’s your food.”



The phone rang in Jack’s room. He looked at the clock radio on the bedside table: 8 AM.

“Hello.”

“Mr. Smith, this is the front desk. Deputy Jones is here and he wants ta see ya.”

“Tell him I’m . . .” He sighed. “Just tell him I’ll have to get dressed.” He hung up the phone muttering to himself.

When Jack stepped out of his room, he saw the deputy leaning against the door of his patrol car with his arms folded. As he walked across the parking spaces in front of the motel’s units, the image before him called up the caricature of the deputy engendered by the words of the bartender.

“Deputy. You wanted to see me?”

He continued to lean against his car. “Yeah, I want to see ya.” He straightened up and opened the car door, motioning to Jack. “Get in.”

Jack hesitated.

“I said, GET IN!”

“And just where are we going?”

“I’ve made you an appointment with the sheriff.”

“How long is this going to take? I’ve made my own appointment this afternoon.”

“Well, it may not take long. On the other hand, you may not be leavin’ there for some time. Now, get in.”

Jack stood in the doorway to the sheriff’s inner office. A middle-aged man, clean-shaven, with graying

hair and a rugged pock-marked complexion stood up. “Come in Mr. Smith.”

Jack stepped forward, eyeing the man without speaking. The sheriff walked around from behind the desk. He was nearly as tall as Jack, a little overweight, but with a powerful upper body.

“Do you know why we’ve asked you to come down here?”

Jack glanced at his name tag: *L. T. Abbot*. He looked into his eyes. “Sheriff Abbot, your deputy here has told me nothing today. So, NO. I do not know why I’m here. I can only assume it has something to do with the death of those two young kids at the archeological dig up north of town.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Yesterday, when I drove up to the dig, your deputy came up to me and, without cause, inferred that I am a suspect in those murders.”

“‘Without cause,’ you say?”

“None that I’m aware of. And he didn’t bother to explain, other than to say that he suspected that a ‘drifter’—as he put it—murdered the two kids. And that, for some reason, he said it had to be a ‘big guy’.”

“What do you know about the alleged murder?”

“Very little.”

“Meaning what?”

“I know that the two who died up there were participating in the dig. And that Dr. Ashcroft and his assistant, Ms. Wu, found the bodies. That’s about

it.”

“How did you learn that?”

“I talked with them yesterday.”

The sheriff looked up at Jack for an inordinately long moment. “You’ll have to stick around here for a while. We’d appreciate your cooperation.”

“My cooperation? To do what?”

“To allow us to do our job in this investigation.”

He walked back around behind his desk, and nodded to Deputy Jones. “OK, Charley, get his fingerprints.”

Jones reached out for Jack’s arm: “Mr. Smith, will ya come along here with me?”

Jack pulled loose from his grasp. “Sheriff, are you charging me with anything?”

Abbot looked up and reached back and scratched his head. “Mr. Smith. If and when we’re ready, you’ll be read your rights. Now, I suggest you go with Deputy Jones.”

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Jack noticed the time on the clock above the bar in the Buffalo Hotel: 4:15 pm. The same bartender whom he talked with the previous day was on duty.

“Well!” The bartender was smiling at Jack. “You fill out those clothes quite nicely!”

Jack laughed. “I took your advice. I didn’t own a sports jacket, but they had some on sale over there, so . . . It’s pretty light weight. I guess it was left over

from the summer.” He took a seat on a bar stool. “The boss in?”

“Yes he is. He’s in the back office. I told him about you. He seemed open to talking with you. I don’t know for certain what he has in mind, but if you’re looking for part-time work, I think you might have a job.”

“Thanks! That’s exactly what I’m looking for.” He held out his hand. “My name’s Jack Smith.”

The bartender took his hand. “Joel McGrady . . . You said you’re passing through. How long you planning on staying in Grand Junction?”

“Oh, I can’t say right now.”

“You’re not in some kind of, uhm, trouble with the sheriff, are you?”

Jack shook his head. “I don’t know. They just had me finger-printed this morning. They wouldn’t tell me why. I think it has something to do with those two kids who died up at the archeology dig north of Fruita. But that’s all I know. Other than that they told me not to leave town.”

“I thought you said you just got into town on Monday, coming from Vail.”

“That’s right!”

“So how could you have anything to do with their deaths? The newspaper said they were found dead on Sunday.”

“Yeah. Well, that sheriff and his deputy don’t seem to believe me.”

“Word of advice. Don’t mention that to the boss.” Jack nodded. “Let me go tell him you’re here.” He walked from behind the bar and toward a back room.

Jack looked at his image in the big mirror behind the bar. He needed a haircut anyway. And it doesn’t hurt to have some nicer clothes.

A short, slightly balding, bespectacled man that looked to be in his late thirties emerged from the back room with McGrady. He walked up to Jack, scrutinizing him with his gaze as he approached the bar. He extended his hand. “The name’s Patrick O’Neal.”

Jack shook his hand. “Jack Smith.”

“Joel tells me that you might be interested in a bartending job.”

“That’s right.”

“And you have some experience?”

“Yes. I tended bar for about a year in Boulder, and before that in Custer, South Dakota for nearly a year.”

“What brings you to Grand Junction?”

“Well, I was just passing through, but I thought I might like to stay a while. I visited the *Dinosaur Museum* the other day, and talked with Dr. Ashcroft and his intern, a Ms. Wu. I found it all very interesting. Thought maybe I could learn a little more about what they’re doing and about this area.”

“How old are you, Jack. You don’t mind if I call you Jack? We’re strictly on first name basis here.”

“No. I prefer it. I’m twenty-five.”

“So you’re not from around here.”

“No. I’m from Ohio. I just graduated from college a few years ago and decided that I wanted to travel a little before I settle down some place.”

“What did you study?”

“Well, it was an odd degree. It wasn’t really planned this way, but I had a double major. Geology and English.”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll tell you what, Jack. I can give you a job, but it’s just part-time, and it will be on a temporary basis. Joel here is our Assistant Manager. You’ll be taking directions from him. He’ll set your schedule and show you your duties. There are three things I insist on. Punctuality, a neat appearance—which I am glad to see you have—and treating all of our guests with respect. I’m not sure what types of bars you’ve worked in before, but this is not a place frequented by a bunch o’ rowdy cowboys. I like to think that the Buffalo Hotel is the nicest hotel in this part of Colorado. And our clientele have high expectations of us. I don’t want to let them down.”

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When Jack arrived back at his motel room, there was a note attached to the door. “Call Sheriff Abbot”

He entered, removed his jacket, and sat on the edge of the bed by the phone.

“Sheriff Abbot? This is Jack Smith. I had a message to call you.”

“Smith, we checked out yer fingerprints. So far, they don’t match the ones we found on the murder weapon—that dinosaur bone. But, we’re still investigatin’ it. There were some smudged fingerprints that won’t let us rule ya out just yet. I’m tellin’ ya this because I’ll be needin’ ya to stay around town for now.”

“Alright, Sheriff. But I’m telling you, your wasting your time on me.”

“Well now, you just let me think about that.”

“I wanted . . .” The phone went dead. “Christ!”

— 2 —

Outside the Piñon Mesa Diner, Jack saw Deputy Jones’s patrol car. It had been more than a month since Jack had last talked to the sheriff, and he still hadn’t been cleared to leave Grand Junction.

When Jack entered, Jones was standing over a woman seated at a table. She was holding an icepack over the left side of her face. It was the same woman Jack had talked with on his first day in Grand Junction, and whom he’d since come to know.

The deputy was taking down some notes. “Can ya remember . . .” He was interrupted by Jack’s presence. “What’dya want, Smith?”

“I was just stopping by to get something to eat before work.”

“Well, ya see, don’t ya, that ya’re not gettin’ nothin’ ta eat here?! And the sheriff’s lookin’ fer ya.” . . . He

turned back to the woman. “I need ta know when ya saw ’im come in. Can ya remember?”

She lowered the ice pack to speak. The left side of her face was puffed up and discolored. Her left eye was nearly swollen shut, and she seemed unable to keep it open. As she spoke, blood pushed up on her lower lip. “I wadn’ watchin’ the clock. It wadn’ long after the sun was up. That no-good bastard come bustin’ in here wantin’ money! Like I had money ta give the son-of-a-bitch! I told ’im so! And he started beatin’ me! He knocked me down ta the floor with his fists, like I was one o’ those bums he liked ta beat up on when he got good and drunk! He took what there was in the cash register. I couldn’ do nothin’! I jist wanted ’im ta leave! I was afraid fer little Sally! . . . And I still am!” She started weeping.

“It’s gonna be OK, Ruby. I’ll find the bastard! And I’ll throw his ass in jail, after I’m done with him! The doctor’s on his way.”

Jack walked over to them. “Who did this, Jones?”

“That goddamned husband o’ hers! When I catch that piece o’ trash, I’ll beat his ass till he can’t stand!”

Jack saw the fury that was raging in the deputy.

“Can I do anything to help?”

“The sheriff’s sendin’ a man down here. But I’m waitin’ on the Doc. Soon as he gits here, I’m headin’ out lookin’ for that bastard!”

“Do you know where to look?”

“Yeah. I got I good idea. Ruby said he was real

drunk when he left. Musta been drinkin' all night. So I'm figurin' he had ta git somewhere to sleep it off. But he's got a big head start on me now." . . . He turned to look out into the parking lot . . . "I wish that Doc'd git here."

A car door slammed outside the café, and a sheriff's deputy came through the doorway in a rush.

"Williams! Look after her." Jones laced his hands around his gun belt. "The ambulance is comin'. I'm goin' after the bastard that beat her." He turned and wagged a finger at Jack: "You git yer ass down ta the sheriff's office!" Jones hurried out the door.

Jack knelt down before Ruby. "Let me get you a fresh wet cloth."

She sniffled and wiped the tears from her checks. "I'm thankin' ya."

When he stood up, the sirens became audible. The deputy stuck his head out the door. "It's the ambulance." Jack went into the back room and found a cloth that he wet in the sink and returned to Ruby's side.

"You're going to be OK. The medics are coming."

She was still sniveling as she spoke. "I don't know what I'm gonna do. He took all the money I had. I got a little in the bank. But I gotta look after Sally! Who's gonna do that?! Who's gonna look after little Sally?!"

"Where is she?"

"He took her!" She broke down again in an ago-

nizing sob.

“I’m sure Deputy Jones will find them both. And she’ll be OK.”

Two medics rushed into the diner. Jack gave way to them. They huddled around her, and examined her facial bruises. Jack stood by as they raised her out of the chair and helped her into the ambulance. One of the two hurried back to Jack. “We’re taking her to the emergency room at the hospital. I think she’ll be fine.”

—o—

Jack had only been in Grand Junction for a couple of months, and this was his second trip to the sheriff’s office.

“You wanted to see me Sheriff?”

He looked at Jack and slowly rose up from his chair. “Smith, ya know Chester Byrd?”

“Who?”

“Yeah, I’ll bet ya do.”

“I don’t know any Chester Byrd. Who is he?”

“Ruby’s no-account husband.”

“Ah. Well, I don’t know him.”

The sheriff walked around his desk and came up close to Jack. “I’m thinkin’ ya DO know him. I’m thinkin’ it was the two o’ ya that took that dinosaur skull, and ya had that dimwit Chester doin’ the killin’!”

“*WHAT?!*”

“Yeah. Ya see, we had got Ol’ Chester locked up before. And we got his fingerprints, and they were all over that dinosaur bone. But the thing is, Ol’ Chester’s not smart enough ta know what that thing’s worth. He wouldn’ know what ta do with it. But I’m guessin’ you know, now don’t ya?”

“Sheriff! This is absolutely ridiculous!”

“We’ll see about that, once we catch up with Ol’ Chester. So, ya just stay around town and behave, like a good citizen, so I don’t have ta lock you up too!”

— o —

“Hey, Jack. I’ll be here until about 7 tonight, so you’ll be closing up.”

“That’s fine, Joel.” Jack was polishing a glass at the bar. “Say, Joel, you know this guy Chester Byrd?”

“Yes, I am unfortunate enough to know him. Actually, most everyone in Grand Junction knows Chester.”

“You know he beat up on his wife this morning?”

Joel was shaking his head. “Again?! You know, that guy got his head screwed on backwards in Vietnam. Before that, he was just a big, dumb, lazy, odd-jobber about town. But something happened to him in Vietnam. He came back mean as a snake. Drunk most of the time; always getting into fights. Acts like the world owes him a living. He’s been in and out of

county jail a dozen times. I'll never know what that poor Ruby ever saw in him."

"Well it gets worse. He also kidnapped his daughter."

"Oh, no! Not that cute little Sally?"

"Afraid so."

"How do you know about all of this?"

"I went to the Piñon Mesa Cafe this morning and that deputy, Jones, was there talking to Ruby. Her face was really messed up. I guess Byrd had come in drunk demanding money from her. She resisted, and he beat her up and stole everything she had in the cash register."

"I'm really sorry to hear that. Is Chester on the lam?"

"Yeah. Jones set out to find him. He said something to the effect that he knew where Byrd would be. Do you have any idea what he meant?"

"Probably this. Whenever Chester got in trouble, he'd try to hide out in the mountains up Monument Road. The sheriff would find him in an old abandoned cabin or old worked-out gold mine. I suspect that's where Deputy Jones will be looking for him."

"Well, Vietnam was thirty years ago. What's he doing for money?"

"You mean other than leeching off of Ruby? He was wounded in the war and has some kind of disability pension. You know, when he first got back to Grand Junction, he married Ruby, who's a good bit

younger than him, and everyone tried to show him some respect. But that sure didn't last long. He just hung around the bars and didn't lift a finger to help Ruby run that café. Then, little Sally came along, and he left her altogether. But he'd always come back, like a bad penny, and steal whatever he could get from her. I'm surprised he hasn't had to serve a long prison term."

"Well, if he kidnapped his daughter that should be enough to put him away for a while, don't you think?"

"It should. It surely should." Joel looked down, shaking his head. "I wish we could do something for that little Sally. My wife's a teacher in the local middle school, and she tells me that Sally is a very smart kid. But ...and maybe it's because of seeing all of the violence between Ruby and that sot Chester ...but my wife says she's painfully shy. And can't really seem to make any friends. I know there are a lot needy kids in this town, but there's something special about that little girl."

Jack looked at the troubled expression on Joel's face. He didn't know what to say.

Joel walked to the back of the bar as he continued: "I thought about trying to get the community to pitch in with contributions for a college fund for her. I don't exactly know how to go about it. And it may even cause Sally to become ever more introverted."

"If she's in middle school, she still has, what, three or four years before she graduates from high school?"

“Yes. Maybe it’s too early to try to start some kind of fund-raising.”

“I don’t know much about these things, but I would think that once word got out about Chester’s rampage, and the kidnapping, that this might be an ideal time to start a campaign for the little girl.”

Joel tapped his chin with the tips of his fingers, then took deep breath and looked back at Jack. “You may be right. The trial should start pretty soon. Ol’ Chester will be very much in the public eye until that’s over.”

“Do you know the Prosecuting Attorney?”

“I’ve met him. He comes in here occasionally.”

“Well, I would think that he would bring out all of the past abuses that Chester Byrd has done to his wife and daughter. I hate to sound too calculating, but that will definitely raise awareness of a campaign for an college fund for Sally.”

“I’ll have to talk with my wife about it. She would have a better idea of how to go about getting something like that started.”



The following day, after Joel and Jack finished setting up for lunch, the two of them sat together at a table, waiting for the afternoon crowd.

“Joel, I had to go see the sheriff again today.”

“What was it this time?”

Jack was shaking his head. “I’ll tell ya, I don’t really understand why he and Jones have it in for me. It’s enough to make me paranoid.”

“Are they still trying to pin those murders on you?”

“Yes and no. Here’s the latest story they’ve concocted in their minds. Somehow I hooked up with Chester Byrd, and convinced him to steal that dinosaur skull and, in the process, he killed those two kids. And the sheriff believes I masterminded the whole crime.”

“Does he have a reason to believe that?”

“He said that Chester’s fingerprints were found on the dinosaur bone that was used in the murders, so they believe he did the actual killing. But the sheriff doesn’t think Byrd is smart enough, or maybe I should say, aware enough of the value of the skull of a T-Rex dinosaur, to have even thought about stealing it. That, you see, is where I enter their crazy story.”

“They don’t have any evidence of that, do they?”

“No. You know I have never even seen Chester Byrd.”

“Count yourself lucky.”

“Yeah . . . Well, on a brighter note, I stopped by the Dinosaur Journey Museum before I went to see the sheriff. I was thinking about what you said about Ruby’s little girl and her shyness, and it donned on me that she could use a mentor. And some steady social interaction. What better place for a bright young

girl to spend her time than in a *dinosaur museum*, where she could interact with the scientist and learn about paleontology? I don't know if you know Dr. Ashcroft?"

"No."

"He's a nice fellow and agreed to meet with Sally. He didn't want to commit to anything until then, but he seemed open to spending time with her."

"Oh! That would be really grand!"

"And he has a young intern working with him. I talked just very briefly with her, but she was excited at the prospect of having someone who is a little younger to kinda' show around . . . sort of like an older sister teaching her younger sibling?"

"Jack, I think that is just great!"

"And by the way, she's Asian, so that might help to socialize them both. You know, I grew up in the Midwest in a numbingly monolithic cultural environment. Apart from the Amish, that is. But they kept strictly to themselves. However, I had the good fortune to be raised by two beloved grandparents, who taught me, among so many other things, the richness that cultural diversity could bring to your life. That's partly why I'm traveling around just now. Back then, I had to experience that as best I could through my readings. And I read all the time. But for Sally, spending time with a young Asian woman could give her that same appreciation in a very natural way early in her life."

Joel nodded with a smile on his face. “Are you going to talk with Ruby about it?”

“Well, I don’t know. I was hoping that you . . . or maybe your wife . . . or both of you . . . could talk to her.”

“I did discuss the college fund for Sally with my wife. She proclaimed it to be ‘a wonderful gesture.’ We talked about designing some tins for collections and distributing them throughout the city. Maybe, we could tie Sally’s connection with the Dinosaur Museum into the campaign! We’ll have to meet with them first!” He was speaking rapid fire.

“Jack?” He abruptly stood up. “Could you take over here for a while? I think I should go have lunch with my wife!”



Jack awoke to a loud, persistent knock on the door of his motel room. He raised up. “Who is it?”

“Deputy Jones. Open up!”

He swiveled on the bed and planted his feet on the floor.

“I said: OPEN UP!”

“I heard you! Can I put some clothes on first?!” Jack rose muttering to himself: “Christ!” He pulled on his pants and slid his arms into his shirt, and tucked it in. When he’d gotten fully dressed, he opened the door.

“Jack Smith, you’re under arrest.”

“Under ...! *For what?!*”

Jones clamped the handcuffs on him. “Murder, Smith. Murder.” He began reading him his rights.

Jack wasn’t listening: “You have some reason for this crazy accusation?”

“We have a witness. Now, come along.” He guided Jack to the patrol car.

“Witness to what?”

He put Jack in the back seat beside Deputy Williams. “A man who saw you murderin’ those two kids and stealin’ off with that dinosaur skull.” He slammed the door on a dumb-founded Jack Smith.

When Jones had climbed into the driver’s seat, Jack leaned forward. “Who is this witness?”

Jones put the car in reverse and backed out of the parking spot. As he wheeled the car onto the street, Jack saw him looking at him in the rearview mirror. He was smiling.

“I’ll tell ya. It was Ol’ Chester Byrd.”

“I told you and the sheriff, I have never even seen the man!”

“Well, that’s not what *he* says.”

“And just *what DOES he say!*”

“He says he saw ya when you killed ’em and he came and took the dinosaur bone from ya, but it was too late to save those two kids. You’d already killed ’em”

“That’s a LIE! Why is he saying this?”

“He’s sayin’ it, ’cause it’s true. We had to beat it outa ’im. He didn’ want ta admit ta bein’ there at all. But he finally come through with it. The sheriff was right.”

“How does he even know about me? I’ve never seen him! He’s never seen me!”

“Well, Smith, we’ll see what the sheriff has to say about that.”

Jack was beside himself. “Listen, Jones . . .”

“That’s *Deputy* Jones. Ya need ta show a little more respect fer the law.”

“OK, sorry. *Deputy Jones*. If this guy saw me murdering those two kids, then he should be able to identify me, right?”

“He HAS identified ya.”

“NO. That’s not what I mean. He should be able to pick me out of a lineup.”

In the mirror, Jack saw Jones’s smile disappear.

“So, Deputy Jones, I request that you put me in a line up and see if he can pick me out.”

Jones was silent.

“It’s only fair. That is, if you want to see if he’s lying. If you really want to find the killer of those two kids.”

“Well, Smith, you’ll have to talk to the sheriff about that.”

They pulled in front of the sheriff’s office, and Jones got out of the car and walked around to where Jack was sitting and opened the door. “Come on, Smith.”

“Wait a minute. Is Byrd in there?”

“Yeah. We got ’im locked up for assault and battery for what he done ta Ruby, and for theft, and for kidnappin’ little Sally.”

“Look, if I go in there and you tell him I’m the one accused of the crime, he’ll say ‘Yeah, that’s him!’ Right? If you’re not gonna put me in a lineup, I’d say you should at least not tell him who I am. Or, better yet, tell him I’m someone else and see if he recognizes me. Tell him I ran a red light and was resisting arrest, or some such story. See how he acts when he sees me.”

Jones hesitated. “Stay here. Williams, you stay here with him.” He went inside.

Jack took a deep breath and looked over at Deputy Williams. “Were you there when they arrested Byrd?”

“No. Deputy Jones brought him in.”

“What’s this Chester Byrd look like? I don’t know if I would have seen him at the Buffalo Hotel’s bar.”

“Nah, he’d not go there. But I’ll tell ya, right now, he’s not lookin’ too good. Deputy Jones really worked him over.”

Jones and the sheriff came out of the office and walked up to Jack in the patrol car. The sheriff looked down at Jack. “Listen ta me, son. I’m gonna let ya come in here and we’re puttin’ ya in jail cell next to Chester Byrd. I want ya to strike up a talk with ’im. We’ll be watchin’ to see if he recognizes ya. Now, listen ta me. Don’t say nothin’ about the murders o’

them kids!”

“Thank you, Sheriff.”

They escorted Jack into the jail, removed the handcuffs, had him empty his pockets, took his belt, and locked him up. Jack watched them leave a crack in the door as they went back into the office.

He looked over at the man in the cell beside him. His was laying on the bunk. His face was one big swollen bruise. His dirty shirt was torn and covered with blood. He rolled his head toward Jack, then back again and closed his eyes.

Jack walked over to the bars separating the two cells. “Hey, Mister?”

Byrd looked over at him and grunted. “Whatcha want?”

“What hit you? You look like you ran into a meat grinder.”

Byrd looked away and closed his eyes again.

“I’ll bet it was that Deputy Jones, wasn’t it?” Byrd still didn’t respond. “I think he enjoys giving a beating.” Nothing. “I’ll bet you didn’t even do a thing. What did he get you for, jay-walking?” Still nothing. “He got me for running a red light. He started to get tough with me, but I wouldn’t have none of that. I’m no pushover. I let him know it. Of course, he hid behind his badge and claimed I was resisting arrest. Cuffed me. Brought me down here and booked me. And all I did was run a red light. And it was actually yellow when I started into it.”

“Hey, man. I ain’t wantin’ ta listen ta ya.”

“Why? You think they’re treating you right? I just want to know if they treat anybody right around here. Can’t you tell me? Does a fellow get an honest hearing in this town?”

Byrd slowly set up on the bunk. “I got a bad head. And I’m real thirsty. You got water there?”

“Yeah, there’s some here. Bring your cup.”

Byrd rose up holding his head and brought his cup over to Jack. Jack looked into his eyes up close, and poured as much of the water as he could through the bars, spilling half of it onto the floor.

“There you go. Man, you really got worked over.”

“Yeah, man. Them damn cops were tryin’ ta git me ta confess to killin’ somebody. But I wouldn’ do it.”

“That’s when they worked you over?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re telling me that I shouldn’t trust the cops in this town?”

Byrd took a long drink of water. “Yeah, that’s what I’m tellin’ ya. Ya from outa town?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if I was you, I’d git the hell outa here and never come back. OH!” He grabbed his head. “AH! I gotta lay down.”

Joel reached out to shake Jack's hand. "I hate to see you leave."

"Well, Joel, this was always meant to be a temporary job. And I had another talk with the Sheriff. You know, they've had Chester Byrd locked up now for more than two months."

"They're probably having trouble finding someone to defend him!"

"Yeah. I'm guessing they also wanted to wait until the beating that Jones gave him wouldn't be so visible."

"I figured you'd stay for the trial."

"Nah, I think I'll move on. From what the Sheriff told me, they seem to have the full story now. Byrd confessed to get some leniency from the court. But, you know, murder is murder."

"How much detail do they have on him?"

"For one thing, Jones went back out to Byrd's hide-out and found the skull. So, he couldn't really deny having taken it. I think that's what really made him crack. He said that he heard some guys in a bar talking about the dinosaur find and how much the fossils were worth. He'd apparently been drinking pretty heavily, and decided to go dig them up. But after he found the site and started digging, those two kids showed up. I guess they challenged him. Telling him the fossils were on federal lands and property of the state and it was against the law to dig them up. They argued, and Byrd flew into a rage and picked up that

dinosaur bone and bludgeoned them to death. He was so drunk, he didn't even think about leaving behind the murder weapon. He just finished digging up the skull and was off to his hideout to stash it until he could figure out how to sell the thing."

"And in the meantime, he needed money and came back to town long enough to beat up his wife and kidnap his daughter. Is that it?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I wondered about the kidnaping. The Sheriff seems to think that he was afraid little Sally would give graphic details to the police of the beating he gave to Ruby. But, you know, after he'd sobered up, something kept him from harming her. Maybe there's an ounce of decency buried down deep in that troubled man's soul."

"Maybe. Personally, I'm glad the town will be rid of him . . . Are you still heading to California?"

"Yeah, I think so. But you never know what you're going to find around the corner. I didn't expect to spend all winter here."

As Jack was leaving Grand Junction, he could see the winter snows giving way to a rush of meltwater down the mountainsides. At the edge of town, he drove past the Piñon Mesa Café. A broad smile came over him. He stopped the car and turned around.

"Hello Ruby!"

"Jack! How's ya doin' ?!"

"I'm doing well, thanks. How have you and Sally

been?”

“Oh, we’re fine. Sally’s lovin’ that Museum. I think she has her first real girlfriend! That young Asian is real nice ta her. Makes me ashamed o’ what I said about ’em in the past.”

Jack smiled at her. “Well, I just wanted to stop by long enough to say ‘Goodbye’.”

“Goodbye? Ya leavin’ us?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. But I’ll try to stay in touch. I’ll be wanting to know about Sally.”

“Well, that Mr. Joel and his wife, they sure been kind. I don’t know what ta say about how much they did in raisin’ money for Sally’s college. I never thought I’d see it. My little Sally goin’ ta college!”

Jack smiled, walked over and put his arms around her, and kissed her on the cheek.

— Milton H Marquis