



Chapter 1

KATIE BRACED HER SHOULDER against the ladies' room door. Heavy knocks pounded into her arm, rattling the metal door against its frame.

"Katie, come out right now!" Dietrich Fischer's voice echoed through the tiled bathroom. "Already we are six minutes late. Everyone is now waiting!"

Squinting her eyes against the hard fluorescent light, Katie tried to clear her mind, but the faces wouldn't go away. An old man in a brown suit. Bloodshot, yellowing eyes. A generous dusting of dandruff on his shoulders, more on the left than on the right. The Asian woman standing in the back with the Minolta camera clasped tightly in long, manicured fingers. The fat man in the straining yellow polo. The four undergrads in the front row, whispering and nudging when she poked her head into the room. . . .

"So what is it that is wrong? You are being sick?" Dietrich's voice broke through the battery of faces. "Answer me!"

Katie lifted a hand to her cheek. Her skin was cold and moist. Her stomach felt like it was going to boil over. Maybe if she just told him . . .

"Katie?" Dietrich hammered on the door, three piercing blows that buzzed into her brain.

She turned to face the door. "I told you . . . an intimate seminar—just for the department. You promised."

"I did. I invited only the department. They made to put up the flyers, but I told them no."

"But the conference room's almost full. You know I can't . . . We had a deal."

"Katie, listen to me. These people are already liking you. They want to meet this smart, brave fossil hunter they read about in the papers. You should be happy to have such fans. What do you want? To disappoint them?"

"But I . . . you know I can't do this. It's too many people. I'll just make a fool of myself. Maybe if I did a webcast for everyone. I could include pictures and all my data. They'd actually get a much better—"

The door pushed in on her, skidding her ridiculous heels clackety-clack across the tiled floor. Dietrich's jowly face appeared in the doorway, squinty eyes darting around the room before settling on her with a frown.

Pulling herself up straight, Katie stared back at him. She wasn't budging from the ladies' room. If he wanted a confrontation, he was going to get it right here.

"Katie . . ." Dietrich cleared his throat uneasily. "Katie, I know you don't like much the speaking to crowds. But I need you to do this. I and the whole lab. We *need* you."

Katie searched Dietrich's face. Something was wrong. Great beads of sweat were rolling down his expansive cheeks. His pupils were too contracted. "This isn't about the department, is it? Something else is going on."

"Nothing is going on with anything. It is a seminar. That is all. A simple seminar in which Thomas Woodburne just happens to be in the audience. But not to worry about him. He's one of your biggest fans. He told me this himself. Just tell the story of Peru. Show the pictures of the *Pericetus*. You'll be very good."

"Thomas Woodburne? The guy from the Smithsonian? What's he doing here?"

"He's very important in Washington. In the NAS."

"Since when do you care about the National Academy?"

"Since always I care about the Academy. Our grant . . ." Dietrich's face contorted into a scowl. He cocked his head and turned to face

the wall. "Grant money does not grow on the trees, you know. This affects your research as much more than mine."

"My research?" Katie stepped toward Dietrich, forcing him to look her in the eye. "You said they'd renewed the grant. You said it wasn't a problem."

Dietrich took a couple of shuffling steps backward until he hit the wall. "It won't be. I'm filing an appeal. Once they find out about your new work . . ."

"So you invited Woodburne without telling me? Who else did you invite? Half of Albuquerque's in there."

Dietrich looked down at his watch. "Eight minutes late! We must go out there now."

"Fine; go ahead. I'm not stopping you." Katie turned to walk away, but a meaty paw pulled her up short.

"Just tell the story of Peru. The capture of the fossil thieves. That is just what they would like to hear."

"But there isn't anything to tell. They destroyed the fossil before I could even look at it."

"Katie, please." His hand tightened around her shoulder. "I need you to do this. Without the grant renewed . . . we'll be out of money by November. I won't be able to pay your salary. Hooman's salary. Wayne's, Peggy's . . . No money, no research."

Katie took a deep breath. The room was *so* crowded. . . .

"You want I should tell Hooman he has to go back?"

"Okay, I get the point. I'm being blackmailed." She resisted the tug on her shoulder.

"Whitemailed only. I'm the good guy boss. Yes?"

Katie couldn't help smiling. She stopped resisting and allowed herself to be led back to the door.

"This will be very easy. You will see." He held the door open for her and guided her through. "They are all your biggest fans."

Katie focused on her adviser's voice as he led her down the hallway. She could do this. It was just like her thesis defense. The number of people didn't matter. Four or four hundred. It was all the same—as long as she didn't look at them.

Dietrich opened the auditorium door and the roar of voices filled her ears. *God, help me. Please . . .* She looked down at the floor, allowing herself to be guided to the front of the room. Her heart pounded in her chest, pulsing through her neck. She couldn't breathe. There was too much pressure.

"Everyone, thank you for being so patient. . . ." Dietrich's voice beat against the roar. Seats squeaked. Desktops clanged into place. Zippers, papers, the shuffling of feet . . .

Katie tightened her grip on Dietrich's arm, leaning against his bulk for balance. One step at a time, she focused on each carpeted stair tread as she climbed higher and higher onto the stage. The murmur of voices assaulted her. She could feel thousands of eyes staring at her. She was naked, exposed, on display for all the world to see.

God, please . . .

". . . earned her PhD in earth and planetary sciences here at the University of New Mexico, where she was the first to discover . . ."

Katie gripped the podium with both hands and pulled herself up straight as Dietrich introduced her. The *Pericetus* whales, the geology of South America . . . She could do this. She didn't have many geology slides, but she could start with her latest findings and use them as a segue into her research on the *Pericetus* fossils. And then maybe, if everything was going okay, she'd tell them about Peru. It was the only thing people seemed to care about these days—even the other paleontologists were more interested in Peru than in her research. Nothing ever changed. Even behind bars the fossil poachers were still stealing her science.

A burst of applause washed through the auditorium. Flashes of blinding light. Katie stared determinedly down at the laptop on the podium. Her ears and cheeks were burning scarlet. Who was taking pictures? She was going to look like a blushing radish.

"Thank you for coming." Her words came out strong and clear. "Before I start talking about ancient whale anatomy, which is, I'm sure, the reason you're all here—" Katie took a calming breath as a ripple of laughter ran through the room—"I'd like to give a brief summary of some recent work I've done on the geology of South America."

The auditorium was perfectly still. Katie relaxed her grip on the podium. She could do this. Piece of cake.

"As you all know, the Tethys Sea, which once covered India, Pakistan, and most of what is now the modern Middle East, was home to the earliest archaeocetes we've uncovered to date: the pakicetids, ambulocetids, protocetids, basilosaurines—"

"Katie, a tiny minute please!" Dietrich called out from the corner of the stage. "For the undergrads and guests . . . Perhaps you must explain the evolutionary significance of these early whales. What is it, the reason of their importance?"

"Okay . . ." Katie closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. She wouldn't let him get to her. Now wasn't the time. "Fifty years ago—" she chose her words carefully—"whales were held up as an argument against the evolutionary model. If modern whales evolved from terrestrial mammals, why didn't we see any evidence in the fossil record? Why didn't we see any intermediary forms?"

"Since then, however, paleontologists have uncovered scores of putative intermediary whale forms. The pakicetids, first discovered in Pakistan by Gingerich in 1981, were fleet-footed land animals with very few adaptations for marine life except for a few features of their ears. They lived roughly 50 million years ago during the early Eocene sub-epoch.

"The ambulocetids, or so-called walking whales, also lived during the early Eocene of Pakistan. They too seemed primarily terrestrial and had well-developed limbs and feet.

"The protocetids of the middle Eocene, however, were primarily aquatic. The *Rodhocetus*, for example, swam using elongated, paddle-like hind feet and the side-to-side motion of its powerful tail.

"Later, during the late Eocene, we get the appearance of the basilosaurines and durodontines, which were fully aquatic and swam like modern whales using an up-and-down motion of their tale flukes. These archaeocetes differed from modern whales in that they had very small, almost vestigial, hind limbs. They also lacked blowholes on the tops of their skulls."

Katie glanced over at Dietrich and received a curt nod. *So far so*

good. "Okay, as I was saying before, most of the earliest whales have been found in and around the Middle East, but due to certain social and political, um . . . factors, most Western paleontologists haven't been able to get into these areas for a long time. A few privileged scientists have obtained exclusive permits to go into Pakistan, and one scientist in particular, who shall remain nameless, has recently made some pretty amazing discoveries there, but since the fossils aren't allowed outside the country, none of the rest of us have been able to verify them. So those of us who want to study ancient whales are pretty much out of luck. Until now . . .

"It just so happens that the geology of the western South American continent is very similar to that of the Middle East. In theory we should be able to find the same types of whales there that Nick Murad, our unnamed scientist, has found in Pakistan but without all the social and political *factors* that make expeditions to the Tethys region so prohibitive.

"As many of you know, I had the opportunity to explore a middle Eocene plain in Peru and was able to demonstrate the presence of whale fossils there. Unfortunately, the fossil I found was destroyed before I had the chance to study it. The part of the skull I could see looked fairly modern, but until we return to the area and uncover another one, we won't know for sure whether the whale had hind limbs and nostrils at the front of the snout like a *Rodhocetus* or a strong swimming tail and a blowhole on the top of the skull like the more modern *Pericetus* whales we've already found in Peru. The sooner we—"

"Katie, a question." Dietrich called out. "Sorry to be interrupting again, but Dr. Webb has a question."

Katie gripped the podium tighter. She could feel the pressure building in her chest. "Okay . . . Dr. Webb?" She kept her eyes fixed on the laptop keyboard.

"So what makes you question the age of the layer? Was it the appearance of the fossil or the geology of the layer itself?"

"I'm sorry." Katie ran through the question in her mind. "I wasn't

questioning the age of the layer. It's definitely middle Eocene. Several other finds confirm the geology report."

"Then how can you question the morphology? If it's middle Eocene, it *has* to be a primitive whale, an *Archaeoceti*."

"How can I question it?" Katie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I question it because it's not known yet. Until we find another fossil, we can't know for sure what it will look like. For all we know, it could have the morphology of Shamu the killer whale."

A gasp sounded somewhere in the auditorium. So much for her attempt at levity.

"Dr. James," a woman's voice called out from the back of the room, "this whale you're talking about—the one that was destroyed—it was the reason you were attacked by fossil poachers?"

"Yes, I . . ." Katie could feel the blood rushing into her cheeks. "With more and more private collectors buying fossils on the black market, fossil poaching is getting to be a huge problem, especially in impoverished countries where—"

"Could you confirm the report that you single-handedly captured five armed men?" A man's voice.

"I . . ." Katie's face was burning now. "Yes, there were five of them. But I . . ."

"How did you do it?" The woman again. "How did you stop so many men?"

"How did I stop them?" Katie sagged against the podium. Weren't these people listening? "I didn't stop them. I tried, but by the time I got back to camp, they'd already started digging. And then, like an idiot, I let myself get captured. By the time I got back in control of the situation, they'd already powdered the fossil. We think they were looking for teeth. A tooth from a *T. rex* can sell for as much as five thousand dollars."

She hit the Page Down key on the laptop to bring up her first slide. "The whales I typically study, including the *Pericetus* whales I want to talk about now, don't have teeth. They have baleen, which they use to—"

"But how did you do it? How did you get away?"

Katie gripped the podium tighter. "It wasn't a big deal. They weren't paying attention so I . . . whacked them on the head."

A volley of flashes hit Katie in the face as a wave of shouted questions washed over her. She squeezed her eyes shut. Tried to tune out the voices. "Baleen whales—"

"Dr. James! Please! Dr. James!" The woman's shouts rose above the roar, beating the other voices down to a low murmur. "Dr. James, please. How do you expect us to believe you hit five men over the heads?"

"Not all at once. They only had two men guarding—"

"Dr. James!" Webb's bellowing voice. "Back to the subject at hand. You still haven't answered my question!"

Katie looked up from the podium. The Asian woman in the back. Her hand was still raised. A man, freckles and thinning red hair, was holding out a microphone. The man with dandruff. The woman beside him, twisting a finger through her hair. Drooping earlobes with big dangly earrings. Mark Cranley from the White lab. Joe Sayers . . . They were all staring, watching. . . .

Katie's stomach surged. Cold sweat streamed down her face. She felt dizzy. Couldn't breathe. *Please, no . . . not again!*

Pushing away from the podium, she staggered across the stage to the stairs. A shoe twisted beneath her foot, sending her crashing down the steps. She hit the carpeted floor and rolled back onto her feet, running. Up the side aisle. Out the door.

The echoes of clacking footsteps chased her down the hallway and into the bathroom. Through the swinging door, into one of the stalls, she collapsed onto her knees in front of a toilet.

Reporters . . . Dietrich was such a liar. He'd promised intimate, but he'd invited reporters! A shudder convulsed her body. She took a long, deep breath. It would serve him right if she walked into his office right now and quit. Let him find someone else to lead the next Peru expedition.

Katie stood up slowly, bracing herself against the stall partition. The pressure in her stomach was subsiding. She took a few experimental steps.

Of all the childish stunts . . . She tottered over to the counter, pulled out a wad of paper towels, and started dabbing her skin. It'd serve him right if the visas were denied. She leaned against the sink, staring at the drain to avoid the reflection that hovered mockingly in the mirror. All those cameras. Thomas Woodburne. She'd looked like an idiot.

A knock sounded at the door. Katie spun around, bracing herself for another encounter.

"Katie?" It was Hooman, one of the grad students from Dietrich's lab. "Katie, are you all right? Dr. Fischer sent me. He asked to make sure you're okay."

Great . . . Does he have to yell? Katie took a step toward the door. Why didn't bathroom doors have locks?

"He wants you to come back to the conference room as soon as you feel better, okay? There are some people in the audience who want to meet you."

An unfamiliar voice sounded in the hallway. Another voice, this one female. Katie cast a glance back at the mirror. Tendrils of fine dark hair were plastered to the side of her sweat-beaded face. She was white as a ghost.

"Katie, are you there?"

Katie glanced around the room. A window was partially open. It looked big enough.

Tiptoeing to the back of the room, she slid the frosted glass panel all the way up and stuck her head out. The courtyard was three stories below her, but at least it was empty. And the ledge was more than wide enough. . . .

"Katie?"

Glancing back at the door, Katie kicked off her heels and tossed them through the window. Then, lifting a leg cautiously over the sill, she ducked through the opening and stepped gingerly out onto the pigeon-stained ledge.

An image flashed before her eyes. She was five years old, scaling a rocky cliff on the Navajo reservation. Her father was down below, calling up to her with a ragged voice. A geyser of panic surged

through her body, freezing her against the dusty wall. Her father . . . She couldn't lose her job. Not now. Her father needed her.

She swung a knee over the windowsill and ducked her head back inside. If Dietrich didn't get his grant renewed . . . because of her freaking out . . .

Another knock sounded at the bathroom door. The murmur of anxious voices. How many people were out there? It sounded like the whole seminar room.

Katie's head started to throb. What was the point? She took a deep breath and stepped back onto the ledge. Going inside would only make it worse. Throwing up on the reporters wasn't going to get Dietrich's grant renewed.

Gripping the bricks with her fingertips, she inched her way along the ledge, careful not to look down. Heights didn't bother her, but if someone was down there watching her . . . if the crowd from the auditorium . . .

Flashing cameras lit her memory. The man with red hair. Orange brown freckles framing pale blue eyes. The man with dandruff . . .

Stop it! Katie stared hard at a grainy line of off-white mortar. What had gotten into her? She was acting like a baby.

She worked her way around a projecting windowsill and sidled to the corner of the building in long, determined strides. She swung herself around the corner and looked down at the roof of the adjoining building. Only a ten-foot drop. Piece of cake.

Pushing off the wall, she twisted her body into the shrieking air. Pain stabbed into her feet as she hit and rolled across a sweltering surface of gravel and tar. *Hot!* She hopped from foot to foot across the burning rooftop and flung herself at the edge of the building. Clinging to the blistering cornice work, she swung her legs over the side and climbed down the ladderlike arrangement of ornamental bricks before dropping onto the ground below.

Brilliant. Katie lay on her back, combing her feet through the soothing coolness of the grass. Jumping barefoot onto a blazing-hot rooftop. *Katie James, brilliant fossil hunter.* For her next trick she would jump barefoot into a hot unemployment line.



Nick Murad leaned against an outcropping of rock and wiped his face with the back of his sleeve. The dusty fabric gritted like wet sandpaper. His right eye burned as a drop of sweat rolled across his upper lid. He raised a hand to wipe his face, but his fingers were coated with a paste of sunscreen and dirt. His shirt, his hat, his pants . . . the grit was everywhere. Eating its way like hookworms into every crease and crevice of his body.

He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head from side to side, flinging away drops of sweat like a big Labrador after a swim. *Beautiful* . . . Now both eyes were burning. What he needed was a shower. A hot shower using nonbiodegradable soap and a towel that wasn't full of sand. He stood slowly, arching his lower back against the Pakistani sunset.

Tomorrow . . . less than twenty hours away. He checked his watch, automatically subtracting nine hours in his mind. It was almost 5 a.m. in New York. Cindy would already be at the airport by now. He could see her standing in line at the flight counter dressed to the nines in an impossibly impractical but totally seductive skirt and blouse. He tried to imagine her carrying twice her limit of suitcases by herself, but his mind's eye kept drifting to her face. Soft, limpid eyes. Full, pouty lips. Her dark sapphire necklace caressing soft, creamy skin.

A hungry ache coiled around Nick's chest, squeezing him until he couldn't breathe. "Okay. Enough." He dropped back to the ground and retrieved his geology hammer from the rocky shelf he'd been working on since noon. He'd see Cindy soon enough. But only a third of the whale vertebra was exposed. If he was going to get it pedestaled before he left, he needed to hurry. He grabbed a chisel and started chipping away at the mudstone that encased the fossilized bone. His students wouldn't have time to finish the excavation before their expedition to Iraq, but he at least wanted to know what it was he'd found.

A soft cry drifted up from the valley. Nick stopped chiseling and turned back to stare into the setting sun. The clank of metal on metal. Nick held his breath, listening.

Maaaah, maaaah. The bleating of sheep.

Diving for his pack, Nick pulled a radio out of one of the side pockets.

"Okay, people, we've got sheep!" He threw open the bag and started stuffing it with gear as the static of answering calls filled the air.

"Nick, this is Andy. Annalise is down by the ridge with Ahamed. Waseem, where are you?"

"Karl here. Waseem's with me. We're at the ridge, but Annalise isn't here."

"Annalise, where are you? We've got sheep coming through!"

Nick swung the pack onto his shoulder and ran sliding and skidding down the gravelly slope. When he got to the bottom, he held the radio to his mouth. "Everybody, this is Nick. Get to the camp right away. Karl, tell Waseem I need him to find Annalise now!"

Leaping a clump of polygonaceae shrubs, Nick took off running toward a point just to the right of the ridge excavation. If Annalise had gone off on her own to do some prospecting, she'd probably work her way west along the hills. That's what he'd do.

A bell clanked—just beyond the rise. Nick, already panting for breath, pushed his burning legs to move faster. The bedouin tribes in the north were usually pretty friendly, but this close to the Afghanistan border all bets were off—especially after what happened to the GSP team in western Baluchistan.

A burst of static cut through the radio. "Nick, this is Andy. We've got Annalise. She and Ahamed were already on their way back to camp."

Relief washed through Nick's body, turning his legs to jelly. He slowed to a jog and turned back in the direction of the camp. "Okay, everybody. Stay inside! Have Waseem watch the trucks. . . . I'll be right there."

By the time Nick reached the campsite, only a half mile separated him from the advance guard of the camel-mounted bedouins. He risked another backward glance. Still too far to make out their features. Unless they had binoculars, they couldn't be sure he was a Westerner. Lots of Pakistanis wore baseball caps.

He jogged into the circle of four tents and three vehicles that made up their camp. Karl and Andy were shuttling equipment from

one of the transport trucks to the cook tent at the base of a rocky mound. Annalise was rolling up the windows of one of the jeeps.

"Michigan students out of sight now!" Nick leaned over, swept up a pack emblazoned with a big gold *M*, and tossed it into the cook tent. "Waseem, stay with the trucks. Ahamed, you're with me. Make sure you keep your hands out of sight!"

Nick paced the length of the camp, inspecting all of their visible gear. Some pickaxes, a tripod and surveyor's scope, a field laptop wrapped in a sheet of plastic . . . There was a lot of expensive equipment, but nothing to indicate the presence of Westerners. Theft was the least of his concerns. Bedouins weren't generally thieves—even the poorest of them. But with all the anti-American sentiment these days, he couldn't afford to have their whereabouts leak out. Even if they weren't harboring terrorists, bedouins liked to talk. And no news traveled like the news of American scientists prospecting alone and unprotected out in the middle of the Baluchistan desert.

The echo of Pakistani voices carried across the thin desert air. The clomp of heavy hooves. Nick hurried over to his tent and crawled past Ahamed, who was already sitting in the entrance, his right arm extended awkwardly back inside the tent like he was holding a concealed weapon.

"Okay . . . everybody quiet." Nick hissed in a whisper loud enough to carry to all the tents. "I hear one word of English and I'm shipping you back to the States."

"*Jee haan maan.*" Urdu for *Yes, Mommy*. . . . Nick couldn't tell whether it was Andy or Karl. A feminine giggle broke the silence off to the right.

"I'm serious." Nick put a hand to his mouth even though none of his students were there to see his smile. "We'll pack this camp up and leave that *Basilosaurus* behind."

A voice jabbered off to the left. The bedouins were almost even with the camp. Keeping well back from the tent opening, Nick angled forward until he had a clear view of the pass. It was getting darker. The shadow of the tents already stretched most of the way across the camp. If those bedouins didn't hurry up . . .

A pang stabbed through him like a knife. Surely the bedouins

wouldn't set up camp so close to their campsite? He had to drive to Quetta in the morning. He needed time to shower and shave and get a haircut. Cindy would be there by noon. If he was going to have any time at all to clean the apartment, he had to leave by 5 a.m. Why hadn't he gone with his instincts and cleaned up before he left?

Come on. Hurry up. Nick's eyes strained into the shadows, willing the bedouins to appear. Maybe they'd already stopped for the night. At least that way the road would be clear for him. As long as they didn't see him leave . . .

Beautiful. Two camel riders plodded into view—not more than a hundred feet from where Nick sat crouched in the shadows of his tent. The bedouins stared back silently at the camp, long rifles still holstered against the sides of their complaining mounts. *Go on. Keep on going.* . . . Nick repeated the words like a prayer as one rider after another passed, guiding a stream of dust-colored sheep.

One of the riders, a tall, lanky, dark-skinned man in a cloak of dusty brown, pulled his mount over to the side and stood facing the tents. He waved with his left hand, keeping his right hand within easy reach of his rifle. Nick crept around the back of the tent until he could see Waseem wave from one of the trucks. Waseem's movements seemed wooden, like he was nervous . . . hiding something. *Of all the stupid mistakes* . . . He should have put Ahamed in the trucks.

He moved back to the right. The bedouin was just sitting there, staring at the camp. Nick shrank even farther into the tent. Of course the guy was staring. They should have been cooking, preparing for the approaching night.

A musical ring tone shattered the silence. Ahamed jumped like he'd been shot. Nick searched frantically about the tent, his eyes finally settling on his nylon pack. Crawling over to the bag, he ripped open the outer compartment and pulled out his satellite phone. Just as he was about to hit the Off switch, he noticed the name glowing on the display. It was Cindy. . . .

The phone rang again.

Had there been another travel advisory? Had they canceled the flight? *Please, no* . . . She wasn't chickening out again. Not now!

He stabbed at the green button and pressed the phone to his ear, turning away from the entrance. "Hello?" he whispered into his cupped hand.

"Hello, Nick? Are you there? I can't hear you." Cindy sounded frantic. Something was wrong. He had to talk to her.

"Hey, Cindy. I really can't talk now. Can you call back in a few minutes?" Nick raised his voice to a hoarse whisper.

"Nick, is that you? I can barely hear you."

"I hear you fine. What's wrong?" His voice sounded like a shout in his ears.

"Must be a bad connection. Anyway, I . . ." Cindy was about to panic. He could hear it in her voice. "The Middle East is all over the news. New fighting in Iraq. Pakistanis protesting the president's visit. I . . . It just doesn't seem like a good time."

"No . . . it's fine. There's nothing to worry about." Nick knew he was talking too loud, but he had no choice. He couldn't let her back out now. Not after all his plans . . .

"You're sure? They showed a huge crowd on the news. They were yelling and burning American flags."

"That's just for the cameras. Just get on the plane. You'll be safe. I promise. Okay? Just get on the plane. I've got everything planned. I even have a surprise."

"A surprise?" Nick could hear the life coming back into her voice. "What kind of surprise?"

"Just get on the plane, okay? You'll see when you get here."

"You're sure it's safe?"

"I'm positive. I love you, okay?"

"Nick, I . . ."

"I've got to go now. Bye." Nick switched off the phone and turned back to the opening of the tent. The bedouin was still watching their camp, his face lit by the faintest hint of a smile.

Ahamed turned and looked back at Nick, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "I love you too . . . honey."



Chapter 2

KATIE RACED THROUGH the geology building, turning first left and then right through the long empty hallways. A clock on the far wall read 9:07. Dietrich was going to kill her. The note he'd left on her desk said he wanted to meet her at 9:00 a.m. sharp. As if yesterday's seminar wasn't bad enough . . . He was going to fire her first and then kill her.

She turned into an old deserted lab and wove her way through the clutter to Dietrich's office in the back corner of the room. Light showed faintly under a dark varnished door. The sound of laughter. Katie slid to a stop and listened with her ear to the door. A deep, throaty voice—it sounded like Dr. Nielsen. *Great*. The way the department chairman liked to talk, they could be in there all morning. At least Dietrich couldn't complain about her being late.

She plopped down onto an old lab stool and spun herself in a slow circle. Dietrich was going to be furious, but the seminar wasn't her fault. He knew she couldn't do crowds, but he had invited the reporters anyway—reporters *and* a member of the funding committee. It would serve him right if he didn't get his grant renewed. He'd be getting just what he deserved.

Her gaze wandered to the lab bench beside her. A partially extracted whale skull sat on a nest of supporting sandbags. Unused tools littered the bench: brushes, chisels, the most expensive Dremel set in the entire lab. As far as she could tell, Dietrich hadn't removed a flake of the surrounding matrix in years. At the rate he was going,

the layer of dust covering the skull was going to harden and encase the skull, once again, in solid rock.

Sliding off the stool, she wandered over to the desk beside the bench and reread the collection of yellowing comic strips filling the built-in bulletin board. *The Far Side, Calvin and Hobbes, Bloom County* . . . not one of the strips was less than twenty years old. Some of them were older than she was. Her eyes drifted from the comics to the cracked, yellow walls of the lab. Safety posters from the 1980s. Gray slate lab benches, dry and powdery as dust. Old wooden desks covered with a fine filigree of darkening scratches. The whole lab was slowly becoming a fossil. Trapped forever in an earlier age.

The door to the office opened, and Dietrich poked his head into the lab. "Katie, where have you been? We have been waiting already fifteen minutes!"

We? As in Dietrich *and* the chairman? Katie took a deep breath and followed her adviser back into his office. "I'm sorry. . . . I was waiting outside. I didn't want to interrupt—"

"Katie James." Dr. Nielsen rose from a green vinyl chair and shook her hand. "It is good to see you again. I've been reading about your Peru trip in the papers."

Katie lowered her gaze. "Sorry about that. I don't know how the reporters got the story, but it wasn't from me. I promise. I haven't spoken a word to any of them."

"That's quite all right. No harm done. A little free publicity never hurt anyone." He glanced over at Dietrich before turning back to her. "But actually I'm not here about the stories. I've actually . . . received a few complaints about your seminar yesterday."

"Complaints?" Katie looked to Dietrich for help, but he avoided her gaze. "The seminar was supposed to be small and intimate—only a few people from the department were even invited—but then this huge crowd shows up: reporters, photographers, undergrads from other departments . . . It was a circus."

Nielsen nodded. "I understand your dislike of crowds and I sympathize. I really do. But you do realize . . . the department has done everything in its power to make things easier for you. We've dropped

our teaching requirements, rescheduled classes, shielded you from crowds at your orals. . . .”

“I know and I really appreciate it, but—”

“Katie, you have to understand what a difficult position this puts us in. Teaching and giving seminars is an integral part of being an academician. You can’t just go out into the desert and find things on your own. You have a responsibility to communicate your findings to others—clearly and concisely—in a way that doesn’t get twisted into—”

“I understand.” Katie looked to Dietrich again. “That’s why I wanted to publish my findings first. I was even willing to do a seminar, but when the seminar deteriorated into a feeding-frenzy press conference . . . What good could have come out of that?”

“What good?” Dietrich flung his hands in the air. “Do you hear what it is she is saying? With Thomas Woodburne in the audience, he with the power to renew our grant, and she asks what good?” He turned back to Katie. “There are more things in consideration here than just papers and seminars. Research takes money and good research takes good money!”

“Yes, of course.” The chairman held up a restraining hand. “And getting funding requires good communication. It’s absolutely essential. The failure to effectively communicate—as we’ve just seen—can be disastrous.”

Katie opened her mouth to argue, but what could she say? She’d run out of the auditorium in front of Thomas Woodburne and a room full of reporters. She watched as the chairman swallowed thoughtfully and settled back in his chair. Whatever it was he wanted to say, she could tell she wasn’t going to like it.

“Katie, I know this wasn’t your intent, but one of the scientists at the seminar insists you, in your presentation, were calling the process of evolution into question.”

“What?” Katie turned a furious look on Dietrich. “That’s ridiculous. I went through all the main archaeocete families. I mean, I know I only hit the highlights, but my talk wasn’t even about evolution. I wasn’t even planning to bring it up.”

“I know this obviously wasn’t your intent, and I’m sure if he had

had time to ask a few clarifying questions, the whole thing would have gotten sorted out before it ever got to be an issue, but since you had to, uh . . . leave the seminar early, he never had a chance to ask those clarifying questions.”

“Okay . . .”

“So he ended up *researching* your background, your beliefs.”

Great. A lump rose in Katie’s throat. *It’s finally happening.*

“Anyway, this scientist came to me yesterday afternoon. He’d discovered your father is a, uh . . . Baptist minister?”

Katie nodded. She could feel her cheeks beginning to tingle.

“And you are a member of his church?”

Katie nodded again and looked him in the eye. “Is that a problem?”

“No, no . . . of course not.” He waved the notion aside with a brittle laugh. “It’s not a problem at all. I only brought it up because, well . . . people have been talking. A few have even suggested—and I want you to know that I don’t believe this for a second—but a few have suggested that you, because of your religious bias, might have fabricated the whole story about the Peruvian fossil poachers. That you yourself destroyed the fossil because it was a further confirmation of whale evolution.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Katie leaped to her feet. “That’s so absurd . . . I don’t even know where to begin. Check with the Peruvian police. See if the five men in jail are figments of my imagination. Better yet, check my field notebook. I have pictures!”

“Take it easy. . . . Calm down,” the chairman said in a soothing voice. “I already told you: I don’t believe them for a second. It’s not me you have to convince. But you have to look at it from their point of view. Here in this room, we know how, uh . . . capable you are in the field, but to people who don’t know you as well as Dietrich and I do . . . You have to admit, the idea that a lone woman could single-handedly capture a band of armed men is pretty hard to believe.”

“That doesn’t mean it didn’t happen!”

“Of course not. But you can see how people might wonder—especially now that it comes out you’re a creationist. You can see—”

"Who says I'm a creationist?" Katie exclaimed. "Just because I'm a Christian doesn't mean I'm a creationist. I know lots of Christians who think God used the process of evolution—"

"Of course, of course—"

"And what do you even mean by *creationist*? Who gets to define the term? The word has way too much baggage."

"Katie, I agree with you," the chairman cut in. "I'm on your side, remember? I'm not labeling you as a creationist. Nobody is. It's just that when you questioned evolution in your seminar—with the press there . . . Of course people are going to talk. It's only natural for the issue of bias to be raised—especially after all the stories about Peru."

"But I never questioned evolution."

"No?" Dietrich cleared his throat and leaned across his desk toward Katie. "I would not wish to disagree, but I remember distinctly you saying *putative*. *Putative* intermediary forms. If this does not call into question evolution, I must wonder what it does."

"But they *are* putative. We don't know for sure *Pakicetus* is on the evolutionary pathway to modern whales. It could have been a side branch, an evolutionary dead end."

"And you saying the whale in Peru could be modern even though its finding was in middle Eocene stratum? What of this? It questions every good principle of integrated biology."

"Not *modern* as in time period," Katie exclaimed. "I said it could have been more modern in form, with the nasal openings on top of the skull rather than at the tip of the nose."

"See?" Dietrich turned to Nielsen with a look of triumph. "She admits it! She expects to find modern forms the same age as four-legged *Rodhocetus*!"

"All I said was we had to reserve judgment until we could look at the actual data. Talk about bias! You're so biased you're condemning me for a lack of bias!"

"So now I am the biased?" Dietrich threw up his hands. "This is outrage!"

"Enough!" Nielsen rose to his feet. "Katie . . . this is all beside the point. I shouldn't have even brought it up. I don't care what you do

or don't believe. It makes absolutely no difference to me *or* Dietrich." He turned a stern look on her adviser. "But I need you to understand the situation. The fact that you ran out of the seminar without clarifying your position—the fact that, because of your . . . condition, you couldn't communicate what you intended to communicate—the controversy you generated will almost certainly prevent Dietrich from getting his grant renewed."

Katie sank back down into her chair. They were blaming her for the loss of the grant? She looked at the floor, automatically assigning ages to the various crumbs and spills. Finally, after a long, uncomfortable silence, she looked up at Nielsen. "So what do you want me to do?"

The chairman shrugged and nodded to Dietrich.

"There is grant money only enough to last to November." Dietrich contorted his face into a look of almost genuine concern. "Not enough to pay students' salaries to end of semester. Hooman, Wayne, Peggy . . . they all still take the coursework."

"What if I went without a salary—until we get another grant?"

Dietrich turned to the chairman, who shook his head.

"That's very generous of you to offer, Katie, but I'm afraid I can't allow it," Nielsen said. "There are rules and regulations concerning payroll issues."

Katie studied Dietrich's face. He was waiting for her to say something. He actually expected her to quit! The lump in her throat sank to the pit of her stomach. If she couldn't work for the university, what would she do? She couldn't move. Her father needed her.

"Perhaps," Dietrich suggested, "if Hooman made to move to a geology lab. He wanted to study the biology, but . . ."

"That won't be necessary." Numbness spread through her body as soon as she spoke the words. "I can take a hint. I'm quitting. Effective immediately. I won't work at a place that doesn't appreciate me."



The bedouin camp lay spread out beneath the early morning stars. Nick lay stretched out on the ground watching the sleeping camp. No

sentries, no guards, no movement of any kind. He leaned over and whispered to Ahamed, "They're just bedouins. As long as they don't find out we're Americans, we should be fine."

Ragged breathing sounded in his ear. "Not if they hide Al-Qaeda." The Pakistani guide's whisper was so faint Nick could barely make it out.

"If they were Al-Qaeda, wouldn't they at least post sentries?"

"So others may know they hide something?"

"So what are we doing here, then?" Nick hissed. He pushed up onto his hands and knees, but Ahamed pulled him back down.

"Wait . . ."

Nick looked back toward the tents. He couldn't see the road from where he lay, but it had to be at least a hundred feet away from the bedouins' camp. As long as it wasn't blocked by sheep, he would be okay. It was a dark night. Even if the bedouins woke up and managed to get out of their tents in time, they still wouldn't be able to tell he was a Westerner. Not with his headlights on. He'd be fine—just another Pakistani shepherd on his way to the market in Quetta.

He checked his watch: 4:35 a.m. If he didn't leave soon, he wouldn't have time to straighten his apartment. "Stay here if you want. I've got to leave now. Cindy's plane comes in at noon."

Ahamed huffed and rolled his eyes.

"It's okay; they're safe enough. They won't even see me." Nick climbed to his feet and started picking his way back to camp.

Suddenly Ahamed was at his side. "Never safe," the guide whispered at his ear. "If you do not leave before sunrise, you do not leave at all. Even in the dark, you still look of the West."

"My father was born in Peshawar, you know."

"And your mother?"

Nick cast a parting glance at the bedouin camp and hurried to keep up with his friend. His mother was Irish and Lebanese. She could pass for a Pakistani, even up close, if you didn't notice her eyes. Of course, not noticing her eyes was almost impossible. Just like Cindy's eyes—if you could keep your gaze on her eyes long enough to take them in. Everything else about Cindy cried out to be noticed too.

"Not too fast." Ahamed held out an arm. "I think I hear something."

"How could you hear with—" Nick suddenly froze. Three massive shadows appeared out of nowhere. They were carrying guns.

Nick slowed to a stop as the bedouins started barking orders in Urdu. He raised his hands in the air, palms forward, fingers outspread. Ahamed responded with a long jabbering speech. Something about *gora chooras*—white Christians.

One of the men stepped forward and spoke in a slow, solemn voice. He turned and nodded at Nick. The other two bedouins started laughing.

"What's he saying?" Nick hissed.

"*Chhh!*" Ahamed silenced him with a raised hand and faced the bedouins. He spoke a few more words of Urdu and turned back to Nick. "The bedouins invite us to share their morning meal. You should know the high importance of hospitality our culture values. This is most serious. Very delicate. Think carefully before you give an answer."

"Did you tell them I have to be at the airport in Quetta in a few hours?"

"Under the circumstances, I do not think this is a wise answer."

"Ahamed, I don't have a choice. If I'm not there to meet Cindy as she comes off the plane, she'll turn right back around and fly home to the United States."

"Perhaps this is the best thing."

"Ahamed!"

The guide sighed and turned reluctantly back to the bedouins. After a short, animated speech the men burst out laughing. One of them stepped forward, jabbered something, and slapped Nick on the shoulder.

"What are they saying? What did you tell them?"

"I tell them the fortunate ones in our party are honored to share their meal, but you, to your eternal disappointment, cannot. I say you must meet your spoiled, demanding American woman at the airport and wait on her hand and foot for two weeks of pure, uninterrupted misery."



Katie slumped back in her pew. The drone of her father's sermon echoed through the tiny church building, flowing past her like an algae-choked creek. She dug her fingernails into her leg. Her father would want her opinion when they got home. She had to pay attention. Silently she repeated his words over and over in her head. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" *Darkens counsel?* It was no use. The words just weren't sinking in. Her thoughts drifted back to the meeting with the department chairman.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" Her father's voice rose to full volume. "Tell Me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements? Since you know."

Katie glanced up at the podium. Her father was looking straight at her, his eyes lit with a mischievous twinkle. *Please, no. Not now . . .*

"These scientists who think they've got the universe all figured out—where were they when God laid the foundation of the earth? Where were they with their careful measurements and observations? Notice it says God 'laid' a foundation. Does that sound like helter-skelter randomness to you?"

Katie shrank down in her seat and stared at the whitening knuckles of her clenched fists. *Calm down.* He was lashing out at Dietrich, not her. The man who had set her up for failure. She wasn't even . . . A lump tightened in her throat. She wasn't even a scientist. Not anymore.

She still couldn't believe it. Dietrich and the chairman had all but fired her. They'd deliberately maneuvered her into quitting. And it didn't take a PhD to figure out why. They'd known about her fear of crowds for years—long before Dietrich had even hired her. But apparently they hadn't known about her faith. Or if they had known, they hadn't cared—not until she'd gotten famous enough for people to start paying attention to what she had to say.

"Turn with me to hymn number 347. . . ."

She pulled a hymnal out of the rack and flipped through the pages. Her father's shaky baritone voice lifted above the wavering

tones of the older ladies in the congregation. Katie's lips moved, but she didn't make a sound. "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." It was her father's favorite hymn. What would she tell him? That she was fired because of her faith? That they'd accused her of destroying the fossil because of her perceived bias? He'd be furious. It would just confirm everything he'd always believed about science. She'd never hear the end of it. But what could she say? He'd want to know what happened, and she couldn't lie to him.

And then there was the question of earning a living. There were bills to pay—big bills. And with her father's condition getting worse, the bills were only going to get bigger. She had to get another job soon. If she couldn't work at UNM, she'd have to move to a different university—whether or not she could convince her father to move with her. She couldn't give up paleontology. She just couldn't. . . .

"... and I know He watches me." The hymn rose in a final tremulous crescendo. Her father looked out onto his congregation, his face radiant with a triumphant smile. Gripping the back of the pew in front of her, Katie closed her eyes while he led the congregation in one last prayer. What if the chairman was right? If the other scientists were already talking about her, it wouldn't take long for word to spread to other universities. If she didn't clear her name soon, she might never get another job. She had to figure out a way to get back to Peru. If she could find another whale, maybe she could redeem herself in the eyes of her colleagues. Dietrich might even give her her old job back. She had to at least try. She didn't have any other choice.

The prayer ended with a chorus of *amens*, and Miss Agnes launched into a rousing piano rendition of "Shall We Gather at the River." Her father stepped down from the podium and was immediately surrounded by a sea of gray heads. Katie settled back into her pew and watched as the eager Navajo women plied him with questions about his last visit to the doctor. She noticed Miss Ida's tiny hunched figure tiptoeing at the back of the mob. She was patiently working her way through the crowd, clutching a heavy casserole dish to her chest. Her reservation-famous fry bread and corn stew. At least Katie and her father wouldn't starve.

Katie leaned over and riffled through her backpack for something to write on. It would take another twenty minutes for the crowd to clear—an hour if they got her father talking about her seminar yesterday. She pulled out an old field notebook and started working out the details for another expedition. If she sold her collection of *T. rex* teeth to a museum, she might be able to—

Shuffling footsteps approached from the center aisle. Katie looked up. Her father had made his way through the congregation and was heading toward her. Katie's eyes darted to the cluster of women following close behind him. They were all watching her, their faces lit with eager anticipation. *No. Please, no . . .* She grabbed her pack and started for the side aisle.

"Katie." Her father's voice froze her at the end of the pew.

"Dad, please. No more arguments. Not tonight." She turned and faced her father. Pain spread slowly across his face, dissolving his gentle smile. He lowered himself unsteadily onto the cushioned bench and looked up at her with concern-filled eyes.

"Katie, Venita was asking about your group meeting this morning. She wanted to know if Dr. Fischer was mad about the seminar."

"I'm sorry." Katie looked up at the rest of the congregation with an apologetic smile. They had all stopped at the invisible line twenty feet away from her pew. They knew better than to crowd her. "I . . ." She tried to think of something positive to say. Venita was the self-proclaimed prayer warrior of the group. She had obviously been praying about the meeting. "Well . . . he didn't yell or anything. He was actually a lot less grouchy than usual."

"And?" Her father seemed to be expecting good news. Like any good could have come from her botched seminar.

"And . . ." Katie looked up at the semicircle of ladies. Venita was grinning like the coyote that killed the giant. "And I guess I have to redeem myself now. I've decided to go back to Peru to find another whale. But this time I'm not letting anyone else near it."



Chapter 3

THE ROAR OF pelting rocks and sand shook Nick out of his daze. Forcing his eyes open wider, he yanked hard on the steering wheel and guided the rattling truck back onto the rutted dirt road. "Come on, just a few more miles. You can make it." His throat burned with the fine alkaline dust filling the cab. Even with the windows and vents tightly closed, the powdery grit still managed to seep inside, coating everything with a metallic-tasting film.

Bracing his knee against the steering wheel, he unscrewed his canteen and took a sip of warm water. His team would be eating breakfast by now, feasting on mutton and *halva puri*. A heavy weight settled into his stomach. All that sand and grit he'd swallowed must have coalesced into a huge brick. What kind of adviser abandoned his students in the field? For two weeks, no less. He wasn't so worried about the bedouins. They seemed friendly enough. But he'd left Ahamed and his students with the hardest part of the dig: encasing the pedestaled fossils in plaster and toilet paper, hauling them out of the desert, packing up the camp . . . While he ran off on an exotic vacation. What had he been thinking? Who cared how many years it had been since his last vacation? It was ludicrous. How had he let them talk him into it?

A chime rang out, sending Nick into a paroxysm of fluttering limbs. He took a couple of quick breaths and looked at his watch. Who would be calling at . . . 5:50 a.m.? Unless . . . He dug through his pack, pulled out the ringing satellite phone, and switched it on. "Hello, Cindy?"

"Uh . . . nope. Not since last time I checked." A deep voice sounded over the phone—Mike Anderson, his administrative assistant back in Michigan.

"Mike? What are you . . ." He quickly subtracted nine hours. "What's wrong? It's almost nine o'clock there. Are you still at the office?"

"Sorry if I woke you, but this afternoon, while you were still asleep, I got another call from Iraq. This time it was the man himself. What's his name?" The phone clunked. Nick could hear paper crinkling on the other end of the line. "His Excellency Mohammed Saeed Al-Jaza'iri Puffy-pants the fourth."

"Right. The new minister of antiquities . . ."

"Whatever." Mike suddenly sounded serious. "Listen! Puffy-pants said Katie James is going after the whale too. She'll be there in four days. Did you get that? *Katie James*. Four days! You've got to ditch Miss Guccier-Thun-Thou and get your team over to Iraq pronto. Dude, I'm telling you, this is your big chance to go head-to-head with her. Mano-a-womano. And dude, I gotta tell you. I looked up her picture on the Internet and all I can say is wuh—mahn—oh!"

"Mike, hold on a second. Slow down," Nick shouted into the phone. "Did he say she's coming for sure? I thought he was giving me an exclusive on this."

"Puffy-pants is giving you an exclusive, but apparently she got her claws into another part of the ministry—some sort of terrorist network from the sound of it. She's scheduled to arrive in Baghdad in four days."

Nick took a deep breath. Katie James would get there twelve full days before he was scheduled to arrive. Twelve days! If he went though with this vacation, he might as well cancel the Iraq trip now. She'd clean out every fossil in Iraq. Back in Peru, James had managed to find a whale, start a dig, and become a comic book hero—all in the three days he'd been stranded in Lima with a busted CV joint. She'd gotten in and out of the country before he'd even had a chance to meet her.

"Hello, Nick? I'm going to have to give Puffy-pants an answer. He wants you there right away. What do you want me to tell him?"

"Hold on a second, Mike. Let me think." Nick pressed the phone against his forehead. There had to be a way he could do this. His department already knew about Iraq. If Katie James beat him to the punch again, he'd never hear the end of it. Some of the older members of the department still thought it was a mistake to hire him instead of her. The last thing he wanted was to give them more ammunition to use against him, especially with his tenure review coming up next year.

Maybe if Cindy went with him . . . She could stay the first night at the hotel in Quetta and then caravan with them through Iran to Baghdad. She'd get to see three countries and his grant would pay for everything. It would only be fair; she'd be part of the team. She could help set up the camp, organize the teams, maybe even help with the digging. . . .

Right . . . He smiled at the thought of Cindy with a shovel. She'd never agree to Iraq. She was jumpy enough about Pakistan. Besides, she'd be there in six hours. Everything was already planned. He couldn't bail on her now. He'd made a commitment. He had to stand by his word.

"Hello? Nick?"

"Yeah, I'm still here." Nick sighed. The brick in his stomach was starting to roll over and over in slow, acid-churning somersaults. This whole vacation thing had been a bad idea from the start. What had he been thinking? Cindy had been a great tour guide in New York City, but out in the Pakistani wilderness? He just couldn't see it. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you call the minister back and let him know, as much as I wish I could, I have another commitment and can't cut my vacation short? If he still wants me to come in two weeks, I'll be there—whether the fossil's been found or not. But if he wants to cancel, I'll understand. I just can't break my word. Not after she's flown all this way."

"All right, dude, your head in the noose. I'll call him first thing in the morning. Need anything else?"

"No, that's it."

"Okay, later. Have a good one."

"Bye, Mike." Nick switched off the phone and tossed it onto the passenger seat. Katie James . . . She was going to beat him again. If Cindy only knew what he was giving up . . . If only she could understand.



The echo of Katie's footsteps sounded loud and lonely in the dimly lit stairwell. She stopped at the third-floor landing and listened. Silence. The whole geology building was dead. Cracking open the door, she peeked out into the deserted hallway. It was almost eight o'clock. Too late for undergrads and still too early for grad students to be coming back from dinner. She slipped through the door and made her way through the maze of hallways that led to Dietrich's office. He'd called her up while she was still at church, insisting he had to talk to her right away. But what could be so sensitive he couldn't discuss it on the phone? Whatever it was, it had to be pretty important to keep Dietrich at work after six o'clock.

After their meeting that morning, he was probably worried about a lawsuit for wrongful termination. Either that or he was afraid she'd try to go back to Peru. No matter what he said, there was no way he could keep her from going after another whale. The whole department was abuzz with speculation about her resignation. It was only a matter of time before the rumors began to spread to the other universities.

A dim light shone around the door at the far side of Dietrich's lab. Balling her hands into fists, she stormed through the deserted room and rapped sharply on the office door. Just let him try to stop her from going to Peru. She'd sue the university for all it was worth. All that nonsense about communication skills . . . Any judge in the country could see they'd forced her out because of her faith. She stepped back as a chair squeaked. Heavy footsteps creaked across the floor. Hushed voices. The door swung open slowly. Dietrich's florid face appeared in the doorway, framed in a halo of fluorescent light.

"Katie, good! Come inside. I am so happy you should join us." He

reached out with both hands and took her by the arm, eyeing her like a braunschweiger and onion sandwich. "Welcome in. Welcome in!" He guided her into the office, pressing a meaty paw to her shoulder.

Something moved in the corner of the room. Dr. Nielsen was standing by the wall, his teeth bared in a wide, coffee-stained grin. "Hello, Katie. Good to see you again."

Katie tensed as she stepped forward to shake the chairman's hand. Why had Dietrich brought *him* into this? Were they really that afraid of being sued? She stepped back and stood facing the two men. Whatever they wanted, she wasn't about to make it easy for them. This time she had the guns and they had the bows and arrows.

"So . . ." Dietrich finally broke the silence. "I know you may be thinking, what is all this meeting all about?" He glanced at the chairman and then turned to her with a stiff smile. "We want you should know we have very good news! We know a way to pay your salary—and at the same time almost probably get my grant renewed!"

Katie looked from Dietrich to the chairman and back again. "Go on."

"I, because of my reputation in the field, am just being given a great honor for all the university. I am invited to go into a country entirely closed to paleontology before now. A shepherd there has reported seeing in the desert what is almost certainly a transitional form between *Pakicetus* and *Rodhocetus*, perhaps the earliest species of four-legged whale to live all its life in the waters—a great finding of major evolutionary significance. And they want that I should find it for them!"

"Congratulations." Katie forced a smile. "I'm happy for you, but I fail to see how this can have any impact on me."

"I, of course, am thinking you should join the expedition," Dietrich announced. "It is a once-in-lifetime opportunity, the kind of finding what makes a career for all of time."

"So what happened to your concerns about my faith? You're not afraid I'll destroy the fossil as soon as I find it?"

Dietrich started to answer but Nielsen suddenly stepped forward. "As we said before . . . we are not now nor have we ever been con-

cerned about such rumors. We simply wanted you to understand what others in the field were saying—to help you appreciate the cost of running out in the middle of a seminar.”

“So you’re throwing me a bone to keep me from suing the university,” Katie said.

“Sue the university?” Nielsen scoffed. “For what? Because Dietrich ran out of money to pay you? Lots of luck with that one.”

“So where’s the money for another expedition coming from? The fossilized tooth fairy?”

“The UNM Foundation,” Nielsen said. “Based on this new opportunity, they’ve agreed to underwrite the entire trip.”

“And my speaking travels too.” Dietrich pushed past the chairman, his eyes lit with a strange fire. “The main point what we are saying, Katie, is we want you should join us. I feel personally terrible what they are saying about you. This is your main big opportunity to prove them that they are wrong. Think about it. That your name should be on the discovery of a new species, a new transitional form of whale . . . How can they say you are creationist then, eh?” He flashed her a conspiratorial smile.

Katie searched his face. “And you’re not mad about the seminar?”

“Of course not. Is forgotten history.”

“And you believe my story about the poachers?”

“Of course so. And the story of Mexico City and the fight in the courtyard. They all say the same thing. Don’t forget, I was there for the trouble in Montana. I know what you say is true.”

Katie eyed Nielsen warily as she considered Dietrich’s offer. If they were telling the truth, if she really did have a shot at a pre-*Rodhocetus*, she’d be set for life. Talk about clearing her name . . . She’d make the cover of *Science* for sure. “So what makes you so sure it’s pre-*Rodhocetus*? I assume scientists have already been searching for it. What makes you think you’ll be able to find it if they couldn’t?”

“First thing: the shepherders brought back already a vertebra. Just analysis, no searching yet,” Dietrich said. “And second thing: it’s not I who should find it. I am to be presenting a paper at the South

Africa Conference. It's you, Hooman, and Wayne who must be going instead."

"The South Africa Conference? Isn't that next week?"

Dietrich nodded. "August thirteenth through the eighteenth."

"But surely you're not talking about . . ." Katie noticed the tautness of Dietrich's features, the rigidness of his stance. It was all starting to make sense. The urgent phone call, the late-night meeting, the presence of the department chairman . . . "You can't be serious. You want me to put an expedition together . . . in a week and a half? That's impossible!"

"Actually, is very possible. And not at all a week and a half. Three days only. The country's Department of Antiquities has hired already guards and drivers and a translator. My new grant, of course, must pay for everything, but they provide also trucks, weapons, tents—all the equipment."

"Weapons?" Katie studied her former mentor beneath narrowed lids. "Just where is this impossible expedition going?"

Dietrich stared back at her, the faintest hint of a grin playing at the corners of his mouth. "Perhaps it may be too dangerous for you, yes?"

No, you didn't . . . Katie's mouth dropped open. *You did not get us into Pakistan.* "Where is it?" Her voice quavered despite all her attempts at self-control.

"No place you should be caring to go, I think." Dietrich's eyes danced as the suppressed smile broke through. "Anyway. Is a bad time right now. Far too dangerous."

"Dietrich?"

"Only the southwestern desert of Iraq. That is all."

"Iraq?" Katie couldn't believe it. "They're actually willing to let us in? Even with the risk of another war? It doesn't make any sense."

"It makes absolutely the sense. With the new fighting breaking out, the Iraqi ministers fear the fossil to be stolen soon. Every time there is fighting, they lose to looting all kinds of national treasure. I talk to them today myself."

"But three days . . . it's not nearly enough time. This is huge. We

can't just rush in without a plan. Fossil hunters haven't been allowed into Iraq for twenty years. We have to gather the geological survey reports, map out a search strategy . . ."

"Of course." Dietrich leaned back against his desk. "If you feel impossible to be prepared, we will find someone else."

"That's not what I'm saying. Three days isn't long enough for anybody. Besides, this is August. Do you have any idea how hot Iraq is now? Why not wait a month for things to cool off?"

"September begins their Ramadan." Dietrich shrugged and looked down at one of the stacks of papers littering his desk. "Even if they would allow us inside their country, I think especially you, being Christian, would not like their times-ten reward for killing infidels during their month of fastings. It might make things even more hotter than just the weather, yes?"

"So we wait until October," Katie said. "It'll be even cooler then. We'll have more time to prepare."

"We leave in three days." Dietrich heaved himself back onto his feet and crossed the office to the door. "Commercial airports are closed. We fly with military transportation from Kuwait directly into Baghdad. I have already the invitational orders. If you cannot be with the team, I am sorry."

"Okay, okay. Three days. I'll be ready." Katie stood her ground. "But I need to talk to Hooman and Wayne. Right now. We have tons of details to work out: geological surveys, plane tickets . . ."

"Yes, yes . . ." Dietrich shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "Wayne is working already on these things."

"Wayne is working?" She let the question hang in the air between them.

"You were resigned this morning, remember?" Dietrich shrugged helplessly. "I told Wayne already he would be expedition leader."

"Wayne?" Katie couldn't believe what she was hearing. "He's just a third year. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm sure one day when he graduates he'll be a very decent biologist, but for such an important project . . . You can't really expect . . ."

"I'm afraid we have no choice." Nielsen stepped forward. "Wayne

will lead the expedition, and if you wish to join his team, we first need to agree on a few things.”

Katie turned a hard stare on the chairman. “What *things*?”

“Well, first of all, I need a guarantee there won’t be a repeat of your little seminar fiasco.”

“That should be easy enough. Next time I have to give an intimate departmental seminar, don’t invite half the newspapers in New Mexico.”

“Katie, I’m serious.” The chairman’s face creased in a glaring frown. “If you find a new transitional species of whale, you’ll be under a lot of scrutiny. Remember, you’ll be representing a state university. I’m sure I don’t need to explain the concept of separation of church and state. I want your word you won’t discuss your religious beliefs—not with your team, not with your colleagues, not with reporters. Are we agreed?”

Katie couldn’t believe she’d heard him right. “Are you asking me to . . . not talk about my faith? What if it’s a personal conversation? What if someone asks a direct question? What am I supposed to do, lie to them?”

“Katie, remember why we ask you this.” Dietrich moved to her side. “We want this should be your big chance to save your reputation. Is for your own good we are thinking of.”

Nielsen nodded. “Absolutely. You could have a long and brilliant career ahead of you. We’re trying to keep you from committing professional suicide.”

“So you’re just talking about seminars, right? You want me to stick to the topic no matter what I’m asked.”

“Right,” the chairman said. “And whenever you’re talking to journalists or other scientists. Just don’t talk about religion. I don’t care whether they’re calling it scientific creationism or intelligent design or George W. Scientology, it’s all religion, and I don’t want you going anywhere near it. Just stick to the accepted facts of science and you’ll be fine. Do we have your word?”

Katie looked over at Dietrich. He was nodding at her, urging her with his eyes to agree. But how could she? She was a postdoc, for

crying out loud. Half her friends were scientists. How would she know when she was off the clock and when she was on? Did eating lunch with her friends count? What about when they were playing dry-ice hockey in the hallways? "I'm sorry, but I can't—"

"Katie, before you answer, you should like to know one more thing." Dietrich paused for a long second. "We are not the only ones who are being invited into Iraq. There is one other team. . . ."

Katie's breath caught in her chest. She waited for Dietrich to say the name, but he just licked his lips and smiled at her, a card shark waiting to throw down his royal flush. *Nick Murad*. He'd already stolen the job at Michigan; now he was going after her career. What else could she do?

Dietrich's face twisted into a grin as he watched her struggle. He had her and he knew it. Murad already had Pakistan. There was no way she could sit quietly by while he built a wall around Iraq.

"The news is better even than you can think." Dietrich's bushy eyebrows twitched like a pair of frightened porcupines. "He is to be taking two weeks vacation in Pakistan starting now. We could find the whale and make partner agreements with Iraq before he even can arrive."

"So what do you say, Katie? Do we have a deal?" Nielsen reached out his hand and left it suspended between them.

Katie stared at the hand. This was her career she was talking about. Her only means of supporting her father. Her only means of clearing her name. She didn't have a choice. "Okay, I'll do it." She reached out and shook the chairman's hand. She felt like she was going to be sick.

"Good, excellent! We knew you'd make the right decision." Nielsen reached behind him and grabbed a book off one of the chairs. "You should read this book. I think it will help. Neurology is a fascinating field. Studies have shown some people have a physiological predisposition to belief in God. The tricks our brains can play on us . . . It's fascinating, really. I'm sure you'll find it very helpful."

"Thanks." Katie reached out and took the book without looking

at it, a diseased patient taking a prescription from a doctor. *Why not give me an injection and be done with it?*



Not again! Nick ripped the stapled notices from his apartment door. “Death to America! Death to Zionist Dogs!” He unlocked the door and pushed into the stifling apartment. *Beautiful. This is just perfect.* He wadded up the signs and threw them into the trash. Cindy would be here in less than two hours. What was he supposed to do? Call the plane and tell it to turn around and go back? Crossing the cramped living room in three strides, he threw open the windows and switched on the fans. Then, throwing himself into a big, overstuffed Baluchi chair, he pulled out the newspapers he’d bought at a corner stand and scanned the headlines. It was even worse than he’d thought. An outbreak of fighting in Iraq. A missile attack in Damadola. Protests over the president’s visit . . . Of all the times for Cindy’s paranoia to be justified . . . Why did it have to be now?

Nick tossed the papers on his desk and hurried back to his bedroom. The protests could last for weeks. Damadola was a long way from Quetta, but once the tribesmen got riled up, it took forever for them to cool back down. He opened his closet and pulled out a long white kurta with hand-stitched embroidery around the collar and a pair of baggy *shalwar* pants. Cindy would be totally weirded out, but he couldn’t risk wearing Western clothes. Not with everything that had happened while he was away. Too much was riding on this. Even something as trivial as spitting on the sidewalk would be too much for Cindy. She’d totally freak out.

He carried the clothes to the bathroom and glanced at his dust-covered reflection in the mirror. With his ruddy complexion and dark hair, it was easy enough for him to blend in, but Cindy . . . Her blonde hair and fair skin would be bad enough, but if she wore the kind of clothes she usually wore, she might as well carry a blinking neon sign that flashed “American prostitute.” The thought made him smile. He could just see her flouncing through the Quetta market in a tank top

and miniskirt. The president himself wouldn't make as big a stir if he were to paint himself blue and juggle live hand grenades. Somehow he had to convince her to wear a *shalwar kameez*. It wasn't going to be easy. He'd rather put panty hose on a cat.

Nick checked his watch. Ten fifteen. He shucked off his shirt and tossed it onto a pile of sand-covered clothes. Buying Cindy clothes would take forever. When was he going to find time to clean his apartment? And with the markets and parks off-limits, what was he going to do with her for two weeks? Take her to his dig? It just wasn't worth it. Maybe he should tell her to turn around and go back home. He and his team would be able to make Iraq. He'd finally get a chance to go head-to-head with Katie James—to prove once and for all the selection committee had made the right choice. A tingle of excitement quickened in his chest. Once he was in Iraq, who knew what would happen? He might even get a chance to meet her.

"No!" Nick spoke out loud, startling himself out of his reverie. Cindy had flown all the way out to Pakistan to visit him. No matter how bad things got, he was going to do his best to show her a good time. He'd given her his word.

Stepping into the bathtub, he pulled the plastic curtain back across the makeshift rod. Two things were certain: If he was going to buy clothes before Cindy's plane arrived, he would have to hurry. And no matter where he went, no matter what he bought her, it would have to be expensive.