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THE THREE OF THEM SET OUT at first light carrying daypacks, binoculars and cameras. It was a thirty-minute drive to the site. Once there, they kept their eyes to the rock, inched up the gorge, saying little. Occasionally they were startled by the staccato riff of a click bug, or the drumming of a woodpecker's beak on a rotting trunk in the forest above, but mostly they heard only small sounds: their own footsteps, the chirrup of invisible birds. The river huddled in its course, a barely audible trickle, leaving most of the bed exposed.

Anna had a good feeling, a kind of lightness inside.

Prospecting, she explained to Scott later, is not looking in any ordinary sense of the word, but a special kind of seeing. What she did was to read the rock: interpret its patterns and irregularities. She knew how brittle and how dense it was, when and how it was formed and later deformed, where the planes might break apart, what it might contain, how, if need be, it could be removed. At the same time, she pictured what might have lived in the environment the rock implied. She knew from experience the architecture of fossilised bones and their texture, compared to that of this particular rock. She could hold the knowledge of a vanished world in one part of her mind,

and at the same time open her eyes to what was there now, in front of her. The two coalesced and she was able to see both what was there and how it had been brought into being.

Listening to her, Scott felt as if he were stone, waiting to be read.

But that day in early September they had not yet met. Anna's gaze passed steadily over the rock. The shale in the Big Crow valley was dark grey, very fissile. It broke in some places into tiny flakes, elsewhere split into broad layers several centimetres thick. On the seams between the layers of rock, the shells of *Sphenoceras* and *Mytiloides* were everywhere, too common to be worth collecting — and yet the preservation was exquisite and the sheer quantity exciting, suggestive of larger possibilities.

Colin Gordon had recently returned from the Arctic. Mike Swenson, a specialist in the bird–dinosaur link who had taken over Anna's job when she left the university, had just spent three months in the Gobi Desert. Anna was returning from her annual visit to the museum in Tokyo. They were all back from field-work at around the same time, and Colin had come up with the idea of a day's prospecting: since Anna had to stop in Vancouver on her way home, he'd pointed out, why not catch a floatplane to the island and join them in a visit to Big Crow?

Why not, indeed. Soon Anna would have to sit on committees and lobby for her slice of budget and technician time: her least favourite part of the job. But now, she could simply observe the profusion of fauna — flesh and fossil, terrestrial and marine; she could stop to examine a scattering of shiny, blue-black fish scales in a fragment of rock and notice, as she stood, a sunbathing garter snake slithering for cover, a cloud of

mosquitoes slow-dancing in a patch of shade. The relics of the past and the creatures of the baking hot now co-existed under the same fierce sun.

An egg-shaped concretion broke open as she touched it to reveal the shiny tooth of a lamnoid shark: perfect, the serrations on its edge crisp, the surface as smooth as the original enamel.

‘Anna, over here!’ Mike called, and she slipped the tooth unprofessionally into her pocket, smiling at herself for doing so, and picked her way across the riverbed.

‘Those plesiosaur fragments turned up here—’ Mike showed the other two the spot marked on his map. ‘Local amateurs. Ken Rivers is describing it. A flipper almost a metre long. No sign of the rest — could even have been disturbed in that massive flood they had in March. Since then—’

‘Enormous ammonites. Crustaceans.’ Colin mopped his brow.

The lower part of the cliff had been slightly undercut. Someone had put a marker — a blob of yellow paint — on the cliff above the excavated section, a rather futile gesture, Anna thought, given the rate at which this kind of shale eroded.

‘An incredibly rich environment,’ Mike said, smiling as he looked back down the rocky valley, as if, Anna couldn’t help thinking, he had made it himself. The old awkwardness between them was long gone, and he seemed very easy with himself. Was he fifty-six, now? Despite family life and middle age he’d stayed lean. His once-blond hair was grey, but there was still, when he pushed back his sunglasses, the shock of his eyes, the blue irises sailing in the clearest of white. *See?* Anna thought. *It did work out for the best. And you are a lucky man.* There was a sliver of envy, too — why pretend? But she took a great

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deal of pleasure in other people's situations, their families and relationships, as well as in her own friendships: *not everyone*, she often had to remind her brother, Vik, *needs to love in exactly the same way*.

In the early afternoon they stopped to rest, sitting on the hot rock to make the most of the treacly September sun. Anna dug in her pack for a bag of nuts, offered them around. Occasionally a fragment of the driest, most fragile shale on the cliffside worked loose, hurled itself down onto the riverbed to land with faint cracking sound as it broke, on impact, into a scattering of tiny flakes. The world is falling to bits, Anna thought, as it is and does, while we, part of it, sit and eat.

'Fantastic paper of yours I read in *Nature*,' she told Colin, who grinned back at her, said nothing. He drank deeply from his water bottle and leaned back into the rock, closing his eyes against the sun. Since she'd seen him last year he had become thin, to the point of haggard; he looked greyer and craggier, as if he were at least part mineral. Clearly, he was not well, but she did not feel she could ask about it, not there and then.

When Mike brushed crumbs from his t-shirt he did it, as he did everything, vigorously, larger than life.

'Three hours back to the car. We two have to get the floater out of here at four-thirty. Guess we'll turn back now, return another time?'

The other two had a meeting the next day, but Anna was free and she had a feeling that she should stay a little longer.

'Your cell won't work here,' Colin said. 'Suppose you break your ankle, meet a bear?'

'I probably won't,' she told him, grinning. 'I'll very likely be okay.'

‘Bear or no bear, you have to let Anna do what she wants,’ Mike said. ‘We’ve all learned that.’

Bursts of loud male laughter faded as they disappeared behind a bend in the river’s course. She turned and walked slowly on and up. The landscape was discernibly wilder, as if, within less than a kilometre, she had passed through some invisible boundary. It was fascinating to be somewhere where trees, the enemies of palaeontology, grew with almost insane vigour, where most of what existed, in fossil terms, was concealed. The gradient rose more steeply and the cliffs to either side were increasingly rugged. She examined them through her binoculars: banded with dark grey shales and fawn-coloured sandstone, they reached up perhaps fifteen metres high. At the top, rising out of a thin layer of dry, yellowish soil, the conifers grew denser and older than those in the planted forest closer to town. Two ravens launched themselves noisily from a tree limb far above her, creaked across the valley and then soared into the sky, leaving a third perched on the branch, head cocked, apparently observing their flight.

And then, as she emerged from a slow rightwards bend in the river’s course, she saw, as if laid out as a gift, her find: a long line of protruding nodules in the riverbed shale. It could only be the spinal column of some enormous creature long-dead, buried, slowly exposed again, and now ready to be seen.

At first it made no sense: the row of grapefruit-sized nodules veered to the right and then shot back at ninety degrees or so, culminating in a narrow, barely exposed shape pointing back to the left. Perhaps a third of the way down was a confused-

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looking area, from each side of which a narrow length plunged straight down at an angle of about forty degrees. These two lengths were immense — three or four metres long. They disappeared, reappeared, and then disappeared again, like crude basting stitches in the stone.

It looked, if anything, like a gigantic broken umbrella — and it was only after she had entertained that thought that she realised what she had found. It was not the marine reptile she'd been half hoping for. What she was looking at did not swim, but *flew*: the long bones must be the huge wing fingers of an enormous flying reptile. Not seriously expecting them to hear her, she cupped her hands to her mouth and yelled back downriver:

'Mike! Colin!' She'd already slipped her pack off and was feeling inside it for the camera when the reply came, very faint:

'An-na!' She stood again, yelled:

'Come— here—!' Because now, she could see it all quite clearly: an elongated, pelican-like skull turned to one side, a bend in the neck resulting from the shortening of tendons and ligaments during putrefaction... She could make out the position of some of the bones of the arms, and the extraordinary, extended fourth digit that would have supported the edge of the wing, half open, half folded. Lower down there was at least a suggestion of another pair of much smaller limbs... Whatever was in there was not only very large, but very nearly *complete*.

The concretions were the same dull grey as the rest of the shale, but denser and smoother, less fissile than the rock surrounding them. It was as if each element of the skeleton had been carefully dipped in a protective coating — though what had really happened was a chemical mystery, a serendipitous combination of organic and inorganic chemistry arising out of

the process of putrefaction, an accumulation of changes which, for a while, had created atypical strength in the rock. If this protective covering had not formed, the delicate, hollow bones of a flying reptile would have been crushed flat as the mud piled up on top of them. But there it was, and her hands shook as she took the first photographs and then extracted her measuring tape from the pack. She willed herself to wait until it passed, and then set the tape along the spinal column — two metres — and took another photograph. She measured, tried to estimate the wingspan — could not believe the figure she came up with: *ten* metres. She'd forgotten the other two and was shocked to see them hurrying towards her, sweating, red-faced and anxious. She ran to meet them.

'Look! Do you see?' There was silence, and then all three began to laugh and talk at once.

'Lie down, Anna,' Colin said, taking out his camera. 'Next to it, there. Arms out. That's it. Amazing!'

Then they set to work, outlining the nodules with chalk and taking more pictures, from different angles. They sketched a map, measured the distance of each protrusion perpendicular to the cliff. It could be, they all agreed, something like *Pternadon longiceps*, or just as easily, given the scale, the new location and the marine nature of the site, it could be an entirely new species or genus.

It was worth trying to get something out. Anna selected one of the scattering of concretions that lay where the third and the fourth digit emerged, cigar shapes that might contain metacarpals or phalanges. She worked the chisel around the edge of one, teasing away the surrounding rock flake by flake and, when her hand suddenly slipped, cursed herself for being too

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lazy to put on gloves. Goggles were sensible, too, but she hated them. Blood spread out and dripped with annoying persistence from the wound on the ball of her thumb; she had to hunt in the pack for a bit of bandage. Finally, she chipped through the narrow pedestal remaining and with both hands picked up whatever it was she'd freed. As she grasped it, it broke horizontally in half.

'Brittle!' she warned Mike and Colin who were working behind her, and then she found it had opened almost perfectly, one half containing the fossil, exquisitely preserved; the other its cast.

After that, they were silent, each sitting or squatting on the warm rock and hearing only the thud and ring of the hammer on the chisel. Then Colin cleared his throat and said, 'Hurry up.'

'Why?' Mike said. 'We won't make it in time and obviously, now, we're going to stay the night—'

'Upriver, right by the cliff,' Colin said, pointing. At first all Anna saw was shadow, but then, just emerging from the rock, she made out what could be another long, narrow bone. The three of them looked at each other as if they themselves were discoveries.

Mike eased his concretion out, handed it to Anna and hurried towards the new area. She wrapped all three pieces in the bubble wrap she carried in her pack, and then they set to work all over again, finishing just as the sun slipped behind the trees above them. Cast suddenly into deep shade, they put on sweat-shirts and rubbed insect repellent on their hands and faces.

'You've got blood on your chin now,' Mike told Anna. 'Christ!' he said, 'and we thought you'd turned your ankle. What luck! Bastard site though, miles from anywhere.' *Difficult*, Anna

thought, *not impossible*. There was history of partnership between their university and the museum when it came to funding applications. And this was something people would want to support.

'I'll get things started,' she said. 'Next summer, we'll be here.' She took Colin's arm, as they set off, not looking anymore, just walking fast. They were all three laughing and talking as they went, though at the same time, in her head, she was bargaining, in a way she tried very hard to avoid, but periodically gave into: 'If I get this one out — and described — it'll be enough.'

Could there ever be enough?

She went to her room while Mike and Colin arranged their extra night and called home, leaving a message for her mother and Janice. Her brother Vik was out too. She set her laptop and cell to charge, showered, dried her hair with the hotel dryer, which seemed to double its volume. Moisturiser, fresh clothes... She leaned into the dimly lit mirror to apply some lipstick, then picked up her jacket and went to the lobby to meet the other two.



'What do you want, Scott?' Dr Hoffman had asked Scott in the 'chat' they had before she last renewed his prescription. She was the plainest woman on earth: grey hair, papery skin, grey eyes, thin all over. She was a total pain, but Scott could tell that she meant well — that she wanted him out of the hole he was in, almost more than he did.

'Something big,' he said. 'Different. Exciting. Out of this world.'

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‘Yes,’ she said, smiling for a moment, and then growing serious again. ‘Of course.’



The mountain that loomed to the west of the town blocked the sun, but indirect light suffused the sky and the air was still warm. They walked the length of the little main street of Big Crow, noting the odd selection of stores that somehow managed to survive: an outdoor activities outfitters cum sports cum general clothing store, a bakery, a tiny library open three days a week. There was a proud, hand-carved sign at the main intersection and a few new buildings but these were outnumbered by the unpainted older ones, many of which looked empty, or, on second glance as if they ought to have been empty, but were not. First the coal mines had closed, and now, it seemed from the protest posters stapled to the hydro poles, the mill had gone too. The setting was spectacular, so there’d be some tourism: outdoor pursuits in summer, good skiing in the winter. Not much else.

Houses began at the town end of the side streets and then petered out as they became country roads. On the way in they had passed a small mall with a gas station, grocery store and hamburger place; they all wanted to avoid that and were glad to push into a dilapidated restaurant, claiming to be genuine Italian.

Now they talked of anything but the find, and thought of nothing else. They had beer, and then a bottle of red wine.

‘So,’ Mike said at the end of the meal. ‘Let’s have some dessert between us and another half to go with it.’ But Colin got up and put some bills on the table.

‘Early start tomorrow. Old man must rest,’ he said. Anna

hugged him before he left, and then she and Mike were silent for a while. He offered wine; she nodded to accept. The dessert arrived, a layered confection of sponge cake, alcohol-soaked cherries, custard and cream so rich that they could do no more than taste it from the tips of their spoons.

His family were all well, Mike said. Lily was pregnant with their third. It was tough on her that he was away so much. Tough on him too: they couldn't have proper summer holidays and, one way or another, he wasn't there for most birthdays and family events. There was a great deal that went on which he just didn't know about. Sometimes, he said, rubbing his face briskly with his hands — a gesture she found familiar — he felt like a stranger when he arrived back home, like an important guest of some kind... It wore off soon enough, but then it happened again. Life in two halves wasn't ideal. Still, what is? You had to live with it. He leaned back in his chair, cracked his finger joints and smiled. The waitress brought their bill.

It was thoroughly night when they left. A three-quarter moon hung low in the sky to the east and a scrap of sea, miles away, reflected the light. Away from the streetlights, everything was grey, silver or black. She was thinking about the specimen, what exactly it might turn out to be. How much of the skull would be there? How much of it could they get out unbroken? What a huge undertaking the preparation would be. She was thinking that it would be wonderful if finally the debate over the way the large flying reptiles became airborne could be resolved. If that was something she might do. She was thinking how she must get hold of Rivers, who was writing up the tarsal bones Colin had referred to, and see exactly what he thought those

were from. She was thinking about the National Geographic, the Natural Science Foundation, the lesser in-house sources. What the competition for grants might be this year, who to ask to referee, who else it might be beneficial to bring in.

Mike cleared his throat. 'Look,' he said, in a clipped, businesslike tone as they turned into the hotel driveway. The sign: *Mountain View Hotel* was lit with a single lamp; the ugly, low-slung building was set back, beyond some landscaping and a carpark. 'Look, I've got a proposal to make. Let's sit here a minute.' He gestured towards one of the picnic tables set beneath a clump of immature fir trees, and then sat on it. Anna remained standing. She assumed that his thoughts were running on the same lines as hers.

'It's this—' he said. 'I'm still trying to work you out. I used to think you must have gone gay, didn't like men. But it certainly looked to me like you had something on with that Brazilian at the conference last year—.'

What? She almost asked him to say it again to be sure she had heard correctly. Didn't they have other far more important things to talk about? What on earth was he doing, and now of all times? Could he not give up?

'Look, Mike,' she said, keeping her voice as steady as she could, 'let's not go there.' He ignored her, smiled, even.

'It's commitment you don't want, is that it?'

He was right, though she would never tell him so. She stood there, astounded. 'I can't give it,' he continued, 'so, we have a fit. What I think, you see, is why don't you and I have some fun when we meet up like this?' He reached out and ran his hand down her arm from shoulder to wrist, then slipped off the bench and pulled her towards him. 'I've always—' His hands

gripped her waist; his erection pressed into the layers of thin fabric that separated their skins and it was odd, very odd, to have her mouth open itself to his and her skin ignite and at least half of her rush to greet the experience, even as another part pulled back, waiting for an opportunity to speak, which clearly was not going to exist unless she made it.

Anna could have said: Okay, Professor Swenson, on your head be it. He was an attractive man offering a simple thing. But leave aside Lily, the kids — he was too close; even as things were, she saw him fairly often and now she'd be working with him on this dig, for heaven's sake! Whatever he thought or said, it would get out of hand and when it ended, he would very likely make a fuss. She pulled away.

'Believe me, this really won't work.'

He grabbed her arm.

'What *is* the matter with you?' he said, and she did half admire him for knowing somehow that he was not getting the whole truth. But it was not as if he had a right to it: since when was there a law that said a person should give a detailed explanation if they decided against fucking someone?

'I thought you were *asking*,' she said. 'Mike, that's my *answer*. No. I want to go in. Let me go!' He did not release her but yanked her closer, grabbed some of her hair with his other hand, and it was then that she hit him. Without thinking, she punched him with her right hand, in the face. His nose buckled, her fist slid into his cheekbone: a noise that was hard and wet at the same time. Pain shot up her arm. He gasped, let go of her. She burst into tears.

'Sorry! Sorry!' she said. Blood was running over his lips and chin. Maybe, Anna thought later, she should have stayed to

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look after him, found an icepack, wrapped it in a cloth? But at the time, it didn't occur to her: she had never done such a thing before and he was furious — she just wanted to get away.

She pushed into the hotel and the brightness of the lobby and the busy pattern of the carpeting seemed extraordinary, surreal in its vividness after the ghostly moonlight outside, and everything she saw shimmered, because the tears, once started, would not stop.

The flickering of a television set showed through the frosted glass of the partition behind the desk, but thankfully, the receptionist was asleep. A sign next to him said *Scott*. His head rested on his folded arms; all Anna could see of him was a thatch of dark brown hair. His sleep was thick and inert, in all ways oblivious and she took the stairs, let herself into the room, locked the door, and then kicked at it until her toes hurt. Why the hell could Mike not leave well alone? Why must he have everything? Why could he not respect her, even if he thought she was wrong? Why fight? Why now?