



Dry Bones: A Walt Longmire Mystery (Walt Longmire Mysteries Book 11)

By Craig Johnson



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Craig Johnson's *The Highwayman* and *An Obvious Fact* are now available from Viking.

When Jen, the largest, most complete Tyrannosaurus rex skeleton ever found surfaces in Sherriff Walt Longmire's jurisdiction, it appears to be a windfall for the High Plains Dinosaur Museum—until Danny Lone Elk, the Cheyenne rancher on whose property the remains were discovered, turns up dead, floating face down in a turtle pond. With millions of dollars at stake, a number of groups step forward to claim her, including Danny's family, the tribe, and the federal government. As Wyoming's Acting Deputy Attorney and a cadre of FBI officers descend on the town, Walt is determined to find out who would benefit from Danny's death, enlisting old friends Lucian Connolly and Omar Rhoades, along with Dog and best friend Henry Standing Bear, to trawl the vast Lone Elk ranch looking for answers to a sixty-five-million-year-old cold case that's heating up fast.

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Bibliography**

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Editorial Review

Review

“Fast-paced [and] entertaining....Johnson, as usual, offers colorful glimpses of Wyoming history and its physical features. Johnson is able to make the landscape itself at least as fascinating as the slightly off-kilter, and sometimes murderous, folks that inhabit Walt’s universe.”

—*Denver Post*

“The [Longmire] series continues to be fresh and innovative. In *Dry Bones*, Johnson accomplishes this through a ‘sixty-five-million-year-old cold case’ with current social and political implications, as well as via vibrantly complex characters. Devoted series fans won’t feel a sense of déjà vu in *Dry Bones*, but they will easily identify Johnson’s tendency toward innovative imagery (‘my brain felt like it was bouncing around like a sneaker inside a washing machine’), crack dialogue, humor and a strong sense of place. Absaroka’s maker brings dem bones to life, and readers are sure to rejoice.”

—*Shelf Awareness*

“[Walt Longmire] remains tough, smart, honest, and capable of entertaining fans with another difficult, dangerous case.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“[Longmire] never disappoints the reader: he’s a hero through thick and thin.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for Craig Johnson and the Longmire Series

“It’s the scenery—and the big guy standing in front of the scenery—that keeps us coming back to Craig Johnson’s lean and leathery mysteries.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Sometimes funny, sometimes touching, and always entertaining, *Wait for Signs* is a complete delight.”

—*Shelf Awareness*

“Like the greatest crime novelists, Johnson is a student of human nature. Walt Longmire is strong but fallible, a man whose devil-may-care stoicism masks a heightened sensitivity to the horrors he’s witnessed.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Johnson’s hero only gets better—both at solving cases and at hooking readers—with age.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Johnson’s trademarks [are] great characters, witty banter, serious sleuthing, and a love of Wyoming bigger than a stack of derelict cars.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“Johnson’s pacing is tight and his dialogue snaps.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Stepping into Walt’s world is like slipping on a favorite pair of slippers, and it’s where those slippers lead that provides a thrill. Johnson pens a series that should become a ‘must’ read, so curl up, get comfortable, and enjoy the ride.”

—*The Denver Post*

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Craig Johnson lives in Ucross, Wyoming, population 25.

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The Cold Dish

Death Without Company

Kindness Goes Unpunished

Another Man’s Moccasins

The Dark Horse

Junkyard Dogs

Hell Is Empty

As the Crow Flies

A Serpent’s Tooth

Spirit of Steamboat

Any Other Name

Wait for Signs

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Them bones, them bones gonna walk around

Them bones, them bones gonna walk around

Now hear the word of the Lord

Disconnect them bones, them dry bones

Disconnect them bones, them dry bones

Disconnect them bones, them dry bones

Now hear the word of the Lord

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was wandering through the Natural History Museum in London with my granddaughter when we stumbled onto a *T. rex*—from all places, Wyoming. I asked my friend paleontologist Bill Matteson and he informed me that the majority of *Tyrannosauri* populating the museums of the world were from around our area, here in the Northern Rockies.

I vaguely remembered a situation in the '80s that had escalated among the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research, an Indian rancher, his tribe, and the FBI over the largest, most intact *T. rex* fossil that had ever been found—all of which seemed rife for a Walt Longmire mystery.

Attacking the subject with half-remembered scenarios and forty-year-old public school science would've been a mistake, so I jumped into the dig with both feet, reading as much as I could about the creature itself, the history of the dinosaur wars here in Wyoming, and finally the titanic cluster that took place right across the border in South Dakota. Many books, including Peter Larson and Kristin Donnan's *Rex Appeal* and Steve Fiffer's *Tyrannosaurus SUE* were essential to understanding what had happened in the tiny town of Hill City, South Dakota, along with the marvelous documentary, *Dinosaur 13*. Two more fabulous sources, which convinced me how little I knew about dinosaurs, were Robert T. Bakker's *The Dinosaur Heresies* and Peter Larson and Kenneth Carpenter's *Tyrannosaurus rex: The Tyrant King*.

To dig up a good story you need a team and mine starts with Gail "Hylaeosaurus" Hochman, and Marianne "Mosasaur" Merola at the office in Times Square, one of the most unpredictable hunting grounds in the world. Down island in the West Village epoch reside the fiercely loyal Kathryn "Carnotaurus" Court and her hunting partner Lindsey "Stegosaurus" Schwoeri. Barbara "Compsognathus" Campo reads the fossil imprints and Victoria "Spinosaurus" Savanh handles the details, both large and small. Carolyn "Conchoraptor" Coleburn keeps an eye to the horizon while Ben "Parasaurolophus" Petrone and Angie "Megalodon" Messina keep the herd moving in the right direction and away from extinction.

There's always a big thanks to Marcus "Rhabdodon" Red Thunder.

Then there's Judy "Tyrannosaurus rex" Johnson, who makes my cold blood run warm.

1

She was close to thirty years old when she was killed.

A big girl, she liked to carouse with the boys at the local watering holes, which of course led to a lot of illegitimate children, but by all accounts, she was a pretty good single parent and could take care of herself and her brood. One night, though, a gang must have jumped her; they were all younger than she was, they had numbers, they might've even been family, and after they broke her leg and she was on the ground, it was pretty much over.

There was no funeral. They killed her and left what remained there by the water, where the sediment from the forgotten creek built up around her, layer after layer, compressing and compacting her to the point where the bones leached away and were replaced by minerals.

It was as if she'd turned to stone just to keep from being forgotten.

It's interesting how her remains were found; her namesake, Jennifer Watt, was traveling with Dave Baumann, the director of the High Plains Dinosaur Museum, when they got a flat—not an unusual occurrence on the red roads the ranchers used for the more inaccessible areas of their ranches where the larger chunks of shale attacked sidewalls like tomahawks. The bigger rock is cheaper, but it's also the size of bricks and has lots of sharp edges, edges that like to make meals of anything less than ten-ply.

Dave had been trying to squeak another season out of the tires on the '67 Land Rover, but there they stood, staring at a right rear with a distinct lack of round, in the middle of the Lone Elk Ranch. While he fished the

jack and spare from the hood and began the arduous task of replacing the tire, Jennifer unloaded Brody, her Tibetan mastiff, and went for a walk. Hoping to meet a friend on the place, she followed a ridge around a cornice, but the dog, who was 150 pounds with a heavy coat, began panting. Before long Jen decided that it might be a pretty good idea for the two of them to try and get to some shade, not an easy proposition out on the Powder River country; luckily, there was a rock overhang along the ridge with plenty enough room for her and the dog to get out of the late afternoon sun.

She wore her blonde hair in a ponytail that stuck through the adjustment strap of her Hole-in-the-Wall Bar ball cap, and, pulling the collapsible dog bowl from her pack, she slipped out a Nalgene bottle, took a swig, and then poured the mastiff a drink.

Jennifer looked out onto the grass that undulated like a gigantic, rolling sea. It was easy to imagine the Western Interior (Cretaceous) Seaway or the Niobraran Sea that had once covered this land, splitting the continent of North America into two landmasses, Laramidia to the west and Appalachia to the east. The great sea had stretched from Mexico to the Arctic and had been over two thousand feet deep. Jen settled under the rock and petted the dog, her green eyes scanning the landscape.

She pulled her video camera from her pack and panned the distance, seeing things out there on the high plains, things that didn't exist, at least not anymore—predatory marine reptiles like long-necked plesiosaurs and more alligator-like mosasaurs almost eighty feet long. Sharks such as *Squalicorax* swam through her imagination along with giant, shellfish-eating *Ptychodus mortoni*.

When she'd been six, her father had brought her to this country from Tucson, Arizona, and had dragged her along on his private excavations that helped support his rock shop on the old highway out near Lake DeSmet between Durant and Sheridan. She still remembered what she'd said one day as they'd gotten out of his battered pickup, her fingers climbing up his pant leg until she found the reassuring hand with gloves worn like saddle leather, the adjustment straps with the transparent red beads. "There's nothing out here, Daddy."

He surveyed the rolling hills that led from the Bighorn Mountains to the endless Powder River country, smiled as he pushed back his straw hat, and spoke gently to her. "There's everything here; you just have to know where to look."

Jennifer had learned to look and had never stopped; Dave Baumann's hands and hers were in the excavations that had led to the displays that crowded the High Plains Dinosaur Museum in Durant, and at twenty-six, she was still searching.

Truth be told, Jen liked dead things better than live ones—they were less trouble, the conversations being one-sided. A lot of investigators and paleontologists are more comfortable that way, able to accept the consensus of truth, disregarding the absolute as something that always carries the danger of being overturned by some new and extraordinary piece of evidence.

She lowered the camera, took another sip of water, and poured her dog more. Brody sighed and shook his massive head, and Jen leaned back under the rock overhang to try to decide what she was going to do with the old man's rock shop, a ramshackle affair near the lake that had started out as a trailer but through the years had evolved into a labyrinth of wooden fences lined with geodes, gems, quartz, and rock samples, most of them worthless.

He had died the year before, and she knew the land was more valuable than the structure itself, but she'd grown up there and loved the old place, as cluttered and tacky as it might be. She pulled the cap over her eyes and dozed until she became aware of a protracted growl in her dog's throat. She swatted at him, but he

continued to rumble a warning until she finally lifted the bill of her cap to look at him. He was looking directly up. Jen's eyes followed to where a two-fingered talon stretched out of the rock ceiling down toward her, almost as if it were imploring. She grabbed the camera and began to film what would become one of the greatest paleontological discoveries in modern times.

• • •

Victoria Moretti sipped the coffee from the chrome lid of my thermos, leaned forward, and, peering through the windshield, watched the man with an intensity that only her tarnished gold eyes could command. "Is that some weird-ass Wyoming fishing technique I don't know about?"

I could see that Omar was tossing something into the water from the banks of the man-made reservoir.

"What the hell is he doing?"

Ruby, my dispatcher, had received a call from him early in the morning and had bushwhacked Dog and me with it when we came in the door. I had filled up my thermos and in turn bushwhacked Vic before heading out to the ten-thousand-acre Lone Elk place to find out what was up.

Outdoor adventurer, outfitter, and big-game bon vivant, Omar Rhoades had contracts with all the big ranchers and sometimes used their property for extended hunting and fishing junkets. Usually he kept his spots secret, but this time he'd told Ruby where he was and that I might want to come out and meet him.

Most everything was in bloom in late May, and I breathed in the scents from the open windows of my truck. As I stared at the aspens and cottonwood, they all began stretching to the sky like those cypresses in Italy that looked like thumb smudges.

My undersheriff turned and looked at me some more. "I thought he was in China."

"Mongolia."

The Custer look-alike was dressed in a state-of-the-art fishing vest, waders, and his ever-present black cowboy hat with more flies stuck in it than Orvis has in its catalog. All in all, I estimated the total worth of his outfit at somewhere close to two thousand dollars, and he wasn't even carrying the fly rod, which was sticking out the rear of his custom-made SUV that dwarfed my three-quarter-ton.

I leaned forward and stared through the windshield. We watched as he drew something from one hand, carefully took aim, and tossed whatever it was onto the smooth surface of the water, black like an oil slick.

Vic turned to look at me as she reached back and scratched the fur behind Dog's ear. "Do you think he's finally lost it?"

I pulled the handle and climbed out of the truck, careful to keep the Saint Bernard/German shepherd/plains grizzly inside. "Let's go find out."

The beauty of Italian descent followed with my thermos as we glided our way through the morning dew in the buffalo grass. "You know, the landed gentry get like this when they spend too much time alone."

I whispered over my shoulder, "Like what?"

"Fucking nuts." She increased her pace and caught up with me. "He's not armed, is he?"

“If he were, I don’t think he’d be throwing rocks.” I stopped at the worn path surrounding the reservoir, curious, but still attempting to abide by the protocol of the high plains angler so as to not upset the fishing—if, in fact, that was what he was doing.

“Hey, Omar.”

He started, just visibly, and spoke to us over his shoulder as he continued throwing pebbles into the water.

“Walt. Vic.”

“What are you doing?”

He glanced at us but then tossed another stone. “Trying to keep those snapping turtles off that body out there.”

We tiptoed to the edge of the bank in an attempt to keep the water from seeping into our boots, and Vic and I joined Omar in his target practice, Vic showing her acumen by bouncing a flat stone off the shell of a small turtle that skittered and swam into the depths. “Any idea who it is?”

Omar leaned forward and lifted his Oakley Radarlock yellow-tinted shooting glasses to peer into the reflective surface of the water at the half-submerged body. “I’m thinking it’s Danny.”

I stared at the corpse, which was a good forty feet from the bank, and tried to figure out how we were going to retrieve it, in that we had no boat. “Himself?”

My undersheriff squinted. “How can you tell?”

“Not everybody has hair like that.” Omar nailed a big turtle that had risen beside the body like a surfacing submarine and had gotten caught in the mass of silver locks that had fanned out from the body. “Danny always had nice hair.”

Omar reached behind him and, pulling out a fancy, stainless steel thermos of his own, poured the tomato-red contents into a cut-glass double-old-fashioned tumbler. “Libation?”

She stared at him, one hand on her hip. “It’s eight o’clock in the morning.”

He shrugged and sipped. “Sun’s over the yardarm somewhere.”

Omar and I watched as Vic expertly skipped a pebble across the glossy surface of the water, the pellet deflecting off another turtle. “How many turtles are there in this damn thing, anyway?”

Omar grunted. “Danny and his brother Enic protect them; nobody is allowed to hurt them—they’re sacred to the Crow and the Northern Cheyenne.”

Vic shook her head and nailed another. “Is there any living thing that isn’t sacred to the Crow and the Northern Cheyenne?”

I tossed a stone but missed. “Nope.”

Omar sipped from his Bloody Mary. “They’re a totem for fertility, protection, and patience.” He turned to look at me. “How are your daughter and granddaughter?”

There was a silence as I formulated an answer, but before I could speak, Vic chimed in. “Excuse me, but did

I miss a transition in the conversation here?"

I tapped my shoulder. "Cady's got a tattoo of a turtle—reminiscent of her willful youth at Berkeley." I glanced back at him. "Should be here the day after tomorrow."

He nodded. "Lookin' forward to meeting Lola."

I smiled and picked up my thermos. "Any ideas on how we get him out of there?" I glanced at the big-game hunter. "You've got your waders on."

He shook his head. "Oh, no. The bank drops off ten feet out, and the reservoir is about sixty feet deep—used to be a shale pit."

I nodded and drank some coffee as Omar refilled his glass and Vic tossed a rock, this time missing her shelled target but causing it to duck its head and silently retreat into the depths. "Can I assume that nine-thousand-dollar Oyster fly rod of yours will do the trick?"

Vic crouched at an inlet on the other side of the pond. "I'm trying to resist saying something about the ironic aspect of a guy who protects the turtles but then falls in his own pond and becomes snapper chow."

"We don't know it's him."

"Sure we do." She held up a paper bag. "I found his lunch, and it's got his name on it." She read, "Daddy-O."

"Topflight detecting, that's what that is." I watched as Omar flipped the fly rod back and forth, trailing the line in cyclical patterns, reflecting in the morning sunshine. "Think you can get him on the first try?"

He ignored my crass remark and flipped the fly forward, yanking it back to set the hook in what appeared to be the sleeve of a green canvas shirt. The outdoorsman carefully walked the banks and reeled in the body as we watched who we assumed was Danny Lone Elk spin slowly with his one arm extended like a superhero in flight, a trail of disappointed turtles in his wake.

As the body came alongside the bank, I reached in, grabbed it by the collar, and dragged the upper part of him onto the grass. "He weighs a ton."

"Lungs are probably full of water." Vic leaned over and grabbed the other side of his collar and we both heaved the deadweight onto the bank, a forty-pound snapping turtle with a carapace the size of a washbasin attached to the dead man's left hand.

Vic dropped her side and backed away from the radially set iridescent eyes, the color not unlike her own. "What the fuck?"

The aquatic monster released the dead man's hand, hissed like a steam train, and extended its neck toward us, evidently not willing to give up its breakfast.

Vic drew her sidearm, but I pushed it away. "Don't. It doesn't mean any harm."

"The hell it doesn't; look at him." She considered. "I've shot people for less than that shit."

I kneeled down, and the beast stretched out its neck even further and struck at me with snakelike speed, the reach surprisingly far. "You know these things are seventy million years old?"

Vic reluctantly holstered her weapon. “This one in particular?”

“They appeared before the dinosaurs died out.” I picked up a stick and extended the end toward the animal’s open mouth. “See the little wiggly red thing at the end of its tongue?”

Vic raised her eyebrows. “What, that means he’s popular with the ladies?”

“That’s what he uses to ambush fish—they think it’s a worm.”

“That’s disgusting.”

I walked around it and raised its rear end, placing my hand underneath the plastron and lifting the creature, rather awkwardly, from the ground. Its head swiveled back, and it snapped with the sound of a small firecracker.

Both Omar and my undersheriff stepped back. “He’s going to bite the shit out of you.”

“No, they can’t reach if you’re holding them from the bottom.” A stream of something dribbled down the length of my jeans onto my boot.

They studied me, Vic, of course, the first to speak. “Did that thing just piss on you?”

“I believe it did.” I swung the big beast around, lowered it back into the water, and watched as the creature settled in the mud and looked back at me, apparently now in no great hurry to get away.

“I guess he likes you.”

I shook the water from my hands and studied the round eyes that watched me warily. “Might be a female.”

“Well, anytime you’re through turtle diddling, we’ve got work to do.” She approached the cadaver again and rolled the body over, looked at what remained of Danny Lone Elk’s face, and immediately turned away. “Oh shit, his eyes are gone.”

Omar kneeled by the dead man and turned his chin. “Critters always go for them first.” He sighed. “Those turtles sure did a number on him.” They both turned to look at me as I stared at the body. “Walt?”

It was a man I’d seen before, in my dreams.

“Walt?”

In the dreams, he also had no eyes.

“Walt.”

The man’s words came back, and it was almost as if he were standing beside me, repeating the mantra of warning I’d stowed away: *You will stand and see the good, but you will also stand and see the bad—the dead shall rise and the blind will see.*

“Walt.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re sure it’s Danny?”

Omar nodded and looked back at the body. “His belt says Danny.” He paused for a moment. “And I

recognize what's left of him."

"Does he have a wallet or anything else on him, like a fishing license?"

Checking the pockets of the dead man, Omar shook his head. "Nothing, but he's on his own property. I don't carry my wallet with me when I'm fishing—always afraid I'll dunk it."

I glanced at Vic. "Did you check his lunch?"

"Might as well; I'm about to lose mine." She reached down, picked up the brown paper bag, and, rummaging through the sack, called out the items. "Daddy-O had one can of orange soda, one cheese sandwich, one bag of Lay's potato chips, an assortment of celery and carrot sticks, and . . ." She fumbled in the bag, finally pulling out a withered, handmade billfold. "One wallet."

"Is it Danny's?"

She held it up for us to look at. "Well, seeing as how it has DANNY engraved on the outside, I'd say yes." She opened it and studied the Wyoming driver's license and the face of the elderly Cheyenne man. "He liked putting his name on stuff, didn't he?"

Omar reached out and straightened the collar of the dead man's shirt. "He was a good old guy—let me bring clients out here whenever I wanted and even let me fly my helicopter into this place."

I glanced around. "Where is the ranch house from here?"

He ignored my question. "There's going to be trouble." He pointed. "The eyes—the medicine men will have to do something about this or Danny will wander the earth forever." He looked up, and I could see tears for his old friend. "Lost and blind."

I nodded, fishing my keys from my jeans so that we could load the man into the truck bed and take him to Doc Bloomfield and room 32, the Durant Memorial Hospital's ad hoc morgue. "I'll get in touch with the family, Henry, and the Cheyenne tribal elders." Walking back to my truck, I thought about my vision and what Virgil White Buffalo and the stranger had said—that stranger, the stranger with no eyes, who ended up being Danny Lone Elk.

•••

The last time I'd seen Danny was at the Moose Lodge at the end of town. It had been a few years back, and he had still been drinking. I'd gotten a radio call that there was a disturbance, but by the time I'd gotten there, no one seemed to remember who had been involved in the altercation.

Asking why he was a Moose and not an Elk, I'd grabbed a Rainier for myself and joined him.

"They got a better bar down here."

He looked up at me and smiled. Lined with more wrinkles than a flophouse bed, the old man's face was cragged but still handsome and carried the wisdom of the ages. He reached over to squeeze my shoulder with a hand as large and spidery as a king crab.

Well into his cups, he spoke to me through clinched teeth; Danny Lone Elk always talked as if what he had to say to you was a very important secret, and maybe it was. "You off duty, Sheriff?"

“End of watch. I came here looking for trouble, but there isn’t any.”

“Can I buy you a beer?”

I gestured with the full can. “Got one.”

He closed one eye and looked at me. “You too good to drink with an Indian?”

“No. I—”

“‘Cause you gotta have a reservation.” He kept his eye on me like a spotlight, guffawed uproariously at his own joke, and then leaned in close. “You wanna know why they called you?” He gestured down the bar where a small contingency of men did their level best to ignore us. “You see that sharp-faced man with the ball cap? That fella in the cowboy hat beside him asked him what he was gonna do on his vacation and he said he was gonna go to Montana and go fishing. Well, cowboy hat told sharp-face he couldn’t understand why he was going fishing in Montana ‘cause there was nothing but a bunch of damned Indians up there.” Danny sipped his beer and looked past me toward the men. “Then sharp-face asked cowboy hat what he was gonna do on his vacation and cowboy hat said he’s goin’ hunting down in Arizona and sharp-face said he couldn’t understand why he was going hunting down in Arizona ‘cause there was nothing but a bunch of damned Indians down there.”

I nodded. “Was that all there was to it?”

“No.” He grinned the secret smile again. “That was when I told them both to go to hell, ‘cause there sure wasn’t any Indians there.”

His voice rose. “Bartender.” He looked back at me, again smiling through the ill-fitting dentures. “I think that’s when this guy called you.”

The man approached somewhat warily. “Can I help you?”

He lip-pointed at sharp-face and cowboy hat. “Yeah; I think I better buy those guys down there a beer; I’m afraid I might’ve spooked ‘em.”

As the barkeep went about distributing the conciliatory beverages, Danny leaned in again. “I knew your daddy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, made the mistake of tryin’ to get him to go to Indian church one time.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah.” He grinned again and nodded. “I was working down at Fort Keogh and lived out your way—had this wife that thought since your family lived so close we should go and invite them to go to church with us.” He leaned in again. “Well, just my luck, your father answered the door, and boy did he give me an earful.”

“I’m sorry; my mother was the religious one.”

“He said he figured I was just tradin’ one superstition for another.”

I took a sip of my beer. “He wasn’t a big one for churches.”

“They still have that place out near Buffalo Creek?”

“I have it now—they’ve both passed.”

He nodded. “I am sorry to hear that—they were good people.” He was silent for a moment and looked down at his lap. “Do you ever see them?”

I turned and looked at him, thinking that I hadn’t made myself clear. “They’re dead.”

He nodded again and then stared at the can in his hands. “Yeah, but do you ever see them?”

“Umm, I don’t . . .”

“When I am alone, hunting or fishing . . .” He breathed a laugh. “. . . And that is the only time I’m alone, by the way . . .” He looked at me. “. . . I see my ancestors, the ones who have walked the Hanging Road to the Camp of the Dead. When I see them, they are far away but watching me like the eyes of the stars.”

Not quite sure what to say to that, I nodded. “That’s nice . . . that they’re looking out for you.”

“I don’t know if that’s what it is.” He took out some antacids, shook a few of the chunky tablets into his hand, and washed them down with some beer. “Mmm, peppermint, my favorite.” He started humming the theme to *Dragnet*, which was also the jingle for the pills. “Tum, tum, tum, tum . . .” Then he opened a prescription bottle that he took from the pocket of his shirt, shook out a few pills, and swallowed them, too. He looked at me blankly. “What was I talking about?”

“Family.”

“Oh, right . . . I am old, and I know I am standing on the brink of the life nobody knows about, and I am anxious to go to my Father, *Ma-h ay oh*. To live again as men were intended to live, even on this world, but I fear for the remains of my family.”

I knew that his ranch was vast and there had been talk of gas, oil, and fossil deposits, but I still couldn’t understand Lone Elk’s concerns. “You’ve got children, right? I’m sure your family will look after those things after you’re gone, Danny.”

It was a long time before he spoke again. “Maybe that’s true, but I would take some things back if I could.”

•••

“I said . . .” My undersheriff raised an eyebrow and sighed, still holding her end of the now blanket-wrapped body. “Did you hear that?”

With Danny Lone Elk’s voice still resonating in my head, I turned and looked around, fully expecting to see the man and his ancestors. “Hear what?”

She glanced at Omar, and then they both looked at me. “A gunshot.”

I took a deep breath to clear my head and my ears. “Close?”

“What, you were having some kind of out-of-body experience?”

“No, I was just remembering when I had seen Danny last.” I thought about adding more, but I hadn’t shared

my experiences in Custer Park with anyone. “Probably the hands who worked for Lone Elk, chasing off coyotes or plinking prairie dogs.” I looked around. “Where was the shot?”

Vic looked toward the ridge. “Not far.”

We hurried to get Danny loaded as quickly as we could, having decided to use Omar’s massive SUV since it had better cover for the body than the open bed of the Bullet and, of all things, a slide-out game rack.

He gestured toward the passenger side. “Get in.”

I glanced at my truck. “Maybe we’d better leave Danny in yours and take mine.”

He shook his head. “This thing’s faster—besides, it’s bulletproof.”

Ushering Vic into the front, I climbed in the back and gaped at the leather and burl-wood interior. “Omar, what the heck is this thing?”

He fired up the engine, slapped the transmission in gear, and tore up the two-track toward the ridge, the three of us thrown back into the butter-soft bucket seats. “A Conquest, Knight XV—it’s handcrafted out of Toronto.”

As we flew across the prairie, I glanced up through the skylight. “What does something like this set you back?”

He shrugged. “Couple hundred thousand, I don’t know—the accountant said I needed to spend some money fast, so I did.”

When we made the top of the ridge, Omar wheeled the glossy black fortress to the left and stopped; we rolled down the windows to listen but didn’t hear anything. Vic leaned forward in the passenger seat and pointed down the valley. “There are some vehicles parked at the fence down there through a few cattle guards—you want to go check it out?”

Spinning the wheel, Omar drove down the slope to a better-maintained road and started off toward the area Vic had indicated.

She turned to look at me. “So, you know the deceased?”

Thinking it best to keep the visions to myself, I told her about the Moose Lodge encounter. “I had a couple of beers with him one time a few years ago.” I could feel her looking at the side of my face as I looked out the tinted windows. “There was a disturbance at the bar and when I got there it had settled down, so I had a beer with him. He was worried about some things, so we talked. It took a while for me to remember him.”

She nodded, not buying a word of it. “What was he worried about?”

“Nothing, getting old, the land, family, the usual stuff.”

“He should’ve worried about learning to swim.”

I recognized Dave Baumann’s weathered, light-blue Land Rover, emblazoned with the logo of the High Plains Dinosaur Museum, driving at high speed toward us. He slid to a stop alongside Omar’s rolling fortress. A quarter of a mile away, I could see another gate where two flatbeds were parked nose to nose blocking the entrance, with some people milling about; beyond that was a working backhoe.

I rolled down the window and was about to speak when the paleontologist began yelling to the young blonde-haired woman in the passenger seat. “They’re using a backhoe!”

I stared at Dave, an athletic-looking fellow with glasses, curly light-brown hair and beard, blue eyes, and an easy smile that made him popular with the young female scientists who sometimes came to intern at the private museum—they called him Dino-Dave.

“Excuse me?”

He took a deep breath to calm himself and continued. “They’re digging up one of the most valuable sites in recent history with a backhoe.”

“I’m no expert.” I sighed and glanced at both Vic and Omar. “But that’s probably not good.”

“No.”

“Who’s in charge here?”

“I am.” He studied me and revised his statement. “What do you mean?”

I had been involved in these kinds of conflicts where the university, the colleges, the museums, and the landowners quibbled about the exact location of digs, and I liked to get the full story before mobilizing the troops. “Is this official or something more loosely structured?”

“It’s a straight-ahead deal; I paid thirty-seven thousand dollars last year for the fossil remains.”

I opened the door. “I guess we’d better go over and take a look. Why don’t the two of you jump in here with us, Dave?” They did as I requested, and I thrust a hand toward the blonde. “Walt Longmire.”

She didn’t take my hand or return my smile. “Jennifer Watt.” She raised her small video camera and began filming through Omar’s windshield.

I shrugged and sat opposite the two of them—the behemoth vehicle had limousine-style rear seating—feeling like I was in some sort of executive conference room. “Tell me about the deal.”

Dave leaned forward as Omar drove south. “It was the standard arrangement with the landowner and the HPDM—that we would search for fossils, and anything we found, we would share the profits.”

Vic turned and looked at him. “I thought the museum was a nonprofit?”

He nodded. “It is at the end of the fiscal year, but when we first unearthed the jawbone last August and we needed more time, I thought we’d better cement a deal with the landowner.” He pointed toward the backhoe. “Just to make sure that exactly this type of thing didn’t happen.” He paused for a moment and pointedly sniffed the air. “What’s that smell?”

Vic threw a chin toward me. “Oh, the sheriff here got pissed on.”

It was about then that a round from some sort of small arms fire caromed off the cab, leaving a narrow but nasty gash on the windshield, and Dave ducked. “My God, they’re shooting at us again!”

I stared at the groove as Omar yelled back over his shoulder, “Ballistic armor glass.”

He hit the gas and barreled down the makeshift two-track toward the roadblock as I turned back to Dave. "They shot at you before?"

"You're damn right they did!"

Another ricochet and Omar fishtailed to the side and gunned it again, in hopes that if we made it closer to the parked vehicles the shooter might be less inclined to fire. We stopped in front of the two flatbeds.

Vic drew her Glock, but I held out a hand, rose up, and got out the other side, just as an Indian cowboy charged up the hillside to slap what looked to be a bolt-action.22 from the hands of a teenage boy.

I walked around both trucks with my hands raised, quickly covering the twenty yards between us. "All right, I'm not sure whose property we're on, but we need to stop the shooting right now."

With one last, hard look toward the kid, the Indian cowboy turned as another, older man in a black flat-brim hat joined him. "Sorry about that, Sheriff . . ."

The teenager interrupted. "You told me to stand guard and not let anybody in!"

The Indian cowboy picked up the rifle and threw it to the older man with the black hat as Vic and Dave joined us. "I didn't mean for you to shoot the sheriff."

"What's going on here?"

He smiled a wide grin. "Protecting our investments." He slapped the teen in the back of the head, knocking off his straw hat, and gestured toward Dave. "You can shoot Dave if you want to . . ." The kid actually reached for the rifle on the older man's shoulder. "Leave your uncle alone; I was kidding." He then threw the bearded paleontologist a glance. "Kind of."

I looked at where the bucket of the big CASE backhoe was scraping away the side of the hill. "You need to stop excavating. Dave here says that you're going to do irreparable damage to the dig."

The Indian cowboy lifted a hand and whipped off his own hat, raising it in a wide wave, his dark hair swooping around his head like a flight of crows. The sound of the heavy equipment halted almost immediately. He turned back to look at us, his perfect teeth contrasting with the tan skin of his handsome face as he extended his hand. "Randy Lone Elk, Sheriff. I don't think we've met." He gestured toward the older man holding the rifle. "This is my Uncle Enic." He lip-pointed toward the teenager. "And the All-American sniper here is Taylor, my nephew."

I shook the hand and gestured toward Baumann. "Dave here is concerned about the integrity of his site."

"*His* site, huh?" He continued grinning. "Then he doesn't know exactly where *his* site is." He spread his arms and half turned, exemplifying the open country. "We are trying to draw some attention, and I guess it worked." He gestured toward Dave. "These guys are attempting to get this fossil out of here before anybody could find out, but we're renegotiating the deal." He looked at me and then at Omar's vehicle. "What the hell is that thing, anyway?"

I ignored the question. "Dave here tells me that you've been compensated to the tune of thirty-seven thousand dollars on this dig."

Randy Lone Elk pointed a finger at Baumann's chest. "That's bullshit, and even if it wasn't, thirty-seven thousand dollars is a joke, if not an insult."

The paleontologist spoke up. “It’s a fair price for what we’ve uncovered so far, more than anyone has ever been compensated . . . And there’s the profit sharing.”

Randy laughed and returned his hat to his head with a tug, settling it hard on his forehead. “Sheriff, do you know what she’s worth? One smaller than this in the Black Hills went for over eight million dollars twenty years ago.”

I shook my head. “I don’t even know what we’re talking about.”

Baumann looked a little embarrassed but then provided the much-needed information. “A *Saurischia*, suborder Theropoda, genus . . .”

“A *T. rex*.” The rancher began yelling again. “Maybe the largest and most complete ever found.”

Baumann shook his head. “We don’t know that until we get the rest of her.”

Unable to contain his enthusiasm, Randy yelled, “We measured the exposed fossil bones, and Jen’s a lot bigger than the one at the Field Museum in Chicago—probably the biggest in the world!”

I couldn’t help but ask, “She?”

Baumann answered, “We can’t tell what sex it is, but generally the larger ones are female.”

Vic laughed. “Why Jen?”

Dave gestured toward the young woman still filming while leaning against the front of the SUV. “Jennifer was the one who found her, and usually you use either the Latin, or a place name, or the name of the person who discovered the specimen for its name.” He continued to shake his head as he glanced back at Randy. “Anyway, it really doesn’t matter. I already paid for the find, and I’m not paying again.”

Randy approached him, sticking his nose inches from Dave’s face. “Well, who the hell did you pay, ’cause it sure wasn’t me.”

“Your father—I paid Danny.”

He took a deep breath and swung around to look at all of us, his fists planted at his hips. “Then I guess we’ll have to wait for the old man to get back from fishing to find out about that.”

2

“It’s the type of asphyxia that is the direct result of liquid entering the breathing passages and preventing air from going into the lungs—in other words, all you need to do is submerge the mouth and nose.”

A full twenty-four hours later, I leaned against the wall of room 32 and watched as Isaac Bloomfield continued examining the body we’d found. “So, he did drown?”

“Not necessarily.” Peering at me through thick lenses, the doc adjusted his glasses. “The sequence of events pertaining to drowning are breath holding, involuntary inspiration and gasping for air at the breaking point, loss of consciousness, and finally, death.”

Vic folded her arms. “And then feeding the turtles.”

Isaac moved some of the hair away from Danny Lone Elk’s face, revealing the missing eyes and other assorted mutilations. “And feeding the turtles, yes.” The doc was approaching ninety and so sat on a stool he’d wheeled over to the examination table, a habit he’d picked up in his dotage.

“Randy says his father went fishing the other morning and that he didn’t come home last night.”

“That would coincide with my findings.” Isaac reached out and lifted the dead man’s hand, damaged where the turtle had attempted to make a meal of it. “I’d say he went into the water at around seven p.m. the day before yesterday.”

Vic leaned forward and looked at the devastation. “So the turtles took their time, huh?”

“I’m no expert on herpetology, but there seems to be a great deal of flesh removed from the fingers.” Isaac examined the bite marks on Danny’s hand, the ring finger having been almost severed. “But they probably wouldn’t have begun feeding on him until his body began to cool.” He looked back up at me, annoyance writ on his face. “Weren’t they worried that he’d disappeared overnight?”

I shrugged. “I guess he did it a lot; they said there are seven different fishing spots on the ranch and nobody ever knew where he went until he got back.”

“Seems irresponsible for a man his age.”

I sighed and restated my question. “So, he drowned?”

He lowered the hand and sighed. “From the initial examination, I would say reversible cerebral anoxia. Note the frothy substance emitting from the mouth and nostrils?”

“Yep.”

“Hemorrhagic edema fluid, the result of mucus in the body mixing with the water; the presence of this contributes to the prevention of air intake and the final asphyxia.”

I glanced at Vic and then back at Isaac. “So, he drowned.”

He stared at the marred features. “The only thing, Walter, was that Danny was a very good swimmer.”

“How do you know that?”

“He, like myself at one time, was a member of the Polar Bear Club.”

Vic glanced at me with an eyebrow arched like a fly rod at full strike, and I figured I’d better explain. “It’s where these crazy people get together and jump into freezing cold water in the middle of winter, usually to support a charity.”

She looked at me, incredulous. “You mean like a frozen lake?”

“Exactly.” Doc Bloomfield stood and redirected an examination light over Danny’s face. “Our chapter used to hold events out at Lake DeSmet on New Year’s Day. There was an instance where one of the younger members jumped in the hole in the ice and became disoriented. The channels are dangerous near the cliffs, but Danny here dove in and brought him back up to safety—as I said, he was an excellent swimmer.” He

focused the light, the contrast making the damage to the man's face that much more horrid. "So, how is it that he could've drowned in one of his own reservoirs on a beautiful day in May?"

Vic glanced at me and stepped forward to study Danny's face. "Why did he stop doing the jump-in-and-freeze-your-ass-off party?"

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