

Mesozoic Murder

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Poisoned Pen Press



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This one is for my mother,
Mary Jeanette Upcraft-Gentry

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Thanks to the Bloody Pens Writing Group
from West Palm Beach, Florida. Tapping
a literary vein with all of you has been
the experience of a lifetime.

Chapter 1

“There is no death. Only a change of worlds.”

Seattle, Squamish Chief

Ansel sinks into the water, far down near the bottom of the pond where the black mud and darkness pull at her with deadly fingers. Light from the ice hole above funnels down like a spotlight. She thrashes harder. Murky water, peppered with rotting debris, swirls around her. So cold. The pain of not breathing hurts. She can't hold her breath.

When she screams, a moaning sound and huge gurgling bubbles pour from her mouth. She inhales. The first swallow of frigid, foul-tasting water rushes over her tongue and into the back of her throat. Panic overwhelms her. She gulps madly for air that will never reach her tiny lungs. Then she begins to die. Slowly.



Ansel Phoenix jolted back to reality, gasping for breath. The crushing black water didn't exist. She was sitting on a metal stool in front of her drawing table, safe and sound in her office. Except that her heart pounded in her chest like a galloping horse.

Ansel's fingers clutched the edges of the drafting board, pressing crescent marks into the soft wood. Just a flashback,

she reasoned. She could handle this. She'd been through these chronic anxiety attacks a hundred times.

Instinctively, Ansel reached her sweaty right hand toward the blue stone hanging from a leather cord around her neck. The cool, solid feel of the azurite pendant quelled her sense of panic. She caressed the natural star-shaped design on the sea urchin fossil with her fingertips. It had been her grandmother's childhood Iniskim.

Her mother, Mary Two Spots, had given her the lucky stone when she was five. After the accident. That's what they called the events of that winter day so long ago when she'd been clinically dead. But it wasn't an accident. Eight-year-old Rusty Flynn had taunted her, and then pushed her through an ice hole on the pond behind her house.

Ansel stared down at the large, colorful pen and ink drawing taped to the tabletop. A snaking thread of water was about to soak into the paper's upper edge.

"Damn."

She grabbed an old rag and quickly blotted up the liquid. A paper cup filled with rinse water for her brushes was leaking, and light reflecting off the liquid-silver trickle had set off an alarm in her head. The telephone on the bookcase rang. Ansel's arm jerked, nearly toppling the cup with her elbow.

"Double damn." Who would call her business line at six in the morning? She yanked up the receiver. "Phoenix Studios."

"Where is my Stegosaurus?"

Ansel flicked a strand of waist-long, black hair away from her still flushed face. "Dr. Andreasson?"

"Of course. I'm supposed to have your drawings by today."

Ansel swallowed. The editor of *Science Quest Magazine* had commissioned her to do five black and white renderings and one full-color cover spread for the December issue. Andreasson, a world-renowned paleontology scholar, needed to approve her drawings before they accompanied his dinosaur article.

“I’m finishing up the final color work. I’ll mail the portfolio by Express Mail. It should arrive by noon tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait much longer. I have deadlines, my dear. You came highly recommended by Rodgers at Folsom Publishing. Don’t disappoint me.”

“I won’t.”

“I’ll call after I look them over. Good-bye, Ms. Phoenix.”

Ansel dropped the remote into its stand and groaned. She glanced at her wristwatch. She was running out of time. She was teaching a field seminar at ten.

She spent another hour on the finishing touches and gazed at the cover art with satisfaction. A green-brown Steggie stood munching on the succulent shoots of a Cycad palm and eyed a large Jurassic butterfly perched on a frond above. Nearby, a puddle of rainwater mirrored the images of the reptile and the butterfly.

The Steggie drawings incorporated three months of research and multitudes of rough anatomical sketches of Stegosaurus bones, ligaments, and skin into vibrant, three-dimensional creations. She had achieved a national reputation as an innovative paleoartist because of her ruthless attention to scientific detail coupled with dashes of artistic flair that filled in gaps of paleontological knowledge.

Ansel sealed the mailing package, addressed it, and left the renovated airplane hangar which now provided a roomy space for her commercial art business. She walked toward the trailer porch through an Alpine-like meadow burgeoning with colorful Indian paintbrush, beargrass, astors, columbines, and dogtooth violets. At one time the area had been a grass runway where the former owner, Marlin Valentine, had taxied his Bonanza six-seater.

“Okay. Everybody out.”

Ansel balanced Andreasson’s package on one arm and shoed two honeybees out the screen door. The Langstroth hive in the field adjacent to the hangar was a legacy from Valentine that vexed her to no end. All year long she tried to

avoid confrontations with the fifty thousand insects that buzzed and dive-bombed across forty acres of property.

By eight thirty Ansel was driving along Highway 13 toward town and savoring her view of the slightly rolling terrain. This time of the year, the land ran riot with perennial plants, shelterbelt trees, and fragrant flowering bushes. Willows and cottonwoods towered over dense strands of service berries, Oregon grape, and kinnikinnick. The sky overhead was brilliant blue without a cloud in sight. Northeastern Montana was called the Big Open for a very good reason.

Grinning, Ansel drove past the huge billboard proclaiming “Welcome to Big Toe. The Dinosaur Capital of the World.” The sign sported the cartoon caricature of an overweight, brown and green, three-horned dinosaur wearing a cowboy hat and six guns. Seeing the town mascot, Tilly the Torosaur, always made her day.

The town of Big Toe owed its existence to this little oasis growing amidst the monotony of the prairie. During the early eighteen hundreds, Sioux Indians had traveled here in search of curing plants and discovered the large, three-toed tracks etched into rocks along the Missouri River waterways.

The Indians had called the area *Sipa Tanka*, which meant “Big Toe,” and so the town had acquired its name from a Mesozoic dinosaur wandering through the flood plains in search of aquatic plants. Today Big Toe was a tiny, but relatively prosperous community with a population of more than eight hundred merchants, cattle ranchers, wheat farmers, and a few native peoples.

Ansel parked the truck in a spot next to Dino-Mite Drugs and lugged Andreasson’s package up to the pharmacy counter that doubled as a postal station.

“Hi, Mr. Tudor.” Ever since she remembered, Wilson Tudor, a tall and distinguished-looking gentleman with gray hair and liquid-brown eyes, had manned this counter.

“I see you’ve been drawing again.” Tudor smiled warmly as he grabbed label stampers and postal stickers from a

counter also cluttered with prescription bottles and insurance printouts.

Ansel slid the box and prepared forms toward him. "This has to go Express Mail." She reached for her wallet.

Tudor worked quickly at tagging the box. "Your mother would be very proud of you, Ansel." She smiled her thanks as she paid. As he made change, Tudor asked, "Your family getting ready for the buffet?"

"Yes. It's going to be bigger and better than ever."

"That Road Kill Chili last year was the best I've ever eaten." He winked. "Don't tell Mrs. Tudor I said that."

"She won't hear it from me. See you there."

Relieved to be finished with the drawings, Ansel hoped Andreasson would be satisfied, and she'd get paid the second half of her contractual advance. She glanced at her watch. Nine thirty already.

Ansel jumped into the pickup and sped out of the parking lot, heading south on State Highway 200. If she pushed it, she could talk to Pitt and still reach the seminar site on time. When she finally gunned the pickup off the main highway and onto an eroded, gravel road leading to the farmhouse, she feared the axles would never survive the trip.

This land was radically different from Big Toe. Treeless, rolling shortgrass prairie mottled with green mudstone and red sandstone, underlaid with shale, surrounded her. Pockets of prickly pear, range grass, and honeysuckle eked out an existence in temporary dirt pockets accumulated by the wind. An intermittent breeze carried a pungent odor through the pickup's air conditioning vents and her nose wrinkled. Pitt operated a pig farm, and the air reeked of dung and urine.

Ansel passed through another barbed-wire fence and parked the truck. As she hopped from the cab, the sun beat down on her head with griddle-hot ultraviolet rays. On either side of her, huge pens filled with obese, black Montana pigs snorted and sprayed muck in all directions. A few porkers

farted. The smell was horrendous, a methane factory on the hoof.

“Hey, Ma’am,” called Feltus Pitt from beneath the visor of a dirt-laden cap brim that read *Pro-Plan*.

Ansel smiled as the welcome scent of spicy aftershave filled the air. “Hi, Mr. Pitt. I stopped by to tell you I’ll be teaching a seminar near Cottonwood Creek this morning. Thanks for letting my field class explore for fossils. We don’t often meet private landowners like you who will let freelance diggers excavate on their land. The Pangaea Society really appreciates your generosity.”

Feltus let loose with a phlegm-popping chuckle and grinned from ear to ear. “No problem, Ma’am. Any old bones in my fields would just dry up and blow away if you don’t take ’em. Can’t see the sense of that. It’s just hard for me to believe that one of those dinosaur critters could eat a pig whole. Now that would be something to see.”

“Most of the bones we find come from vegetarian dinosaurs.”

“You don’t say.” Feltus’ sunburned face turned pensive, skin shifting into a wrinkled likeness of the eastern Badlands. “Hey, Ma’am. Have you done the spring inspection of your hive?”

Ansel moved toward the pickup. “Not yet.”

“Not good to let the hive overwinter and go sour in the spring. Those bees will swarm. I’ll check your hive any time.”

“I’ll think about it, Mr. Pitt. I’ve got to meet the kids. Talk to you later.”

A short drive beyond the house, Ansel spotted Cottonwood Creek. The tools in the flatbed shifted forward with a scraping thump when she halted the truck near a rocky knoll. Outside the cab, she reached in and grabbed her black Stetson just as something fell across her right arm with a sinewy tickle. Her necklace cord lay in the dirt. How odd that the leather string had unknotted itself. The second she grabbed it, Ansel realized that the Iniskim was missing.

Alarmed, she frantically searched the ground for several minutes. When that yielded nothing, she looked inside the cab in case the amulet had fallen there. The charm was nowhere to be found. Tears of frustration flooded Ansel's eyes. She couldn't bear to lose it. A cold shiver skittered up her spine despite the prairie heat. Losing her lucky rock was a very bad omen.

The sound of grinding gears yanked Ansel's attention away. No time to fret over it. A van, a station wagon, and a compact car headed her way.



"I can't wait to begin," said Lydia Hodges. She was padded in khakis from head to foot and looked ready to single-handedly bag a live dinosaur while on safari. "I've wanted to hunt fossils ever since our last seminar."

Biology student Shane Roco looked down at his shirt, shorts, and white leather running shoes and scowled. "Well, nobody told me that we were going to be out in a rocky pig field. Why do they call this place Cottonwood Creek? There's no creek. And there aren't any trees."

"The creek dried up in the eighties," said Tim Shanks, pulling off his straw cowboy hat with feathered hatband and running one hand through his shaggy blond hair. "The cottonwoods just died." He replaced the headgear and flashed Ansel a smile, green eyes accenting the neon colors of his Hawaiian shirt. An expensive-looking 35mm camera hung from a strap around his neck.

Ansel watched the three familiar graduate students before her, silently assessing their behaviors in terms of dinosaurian characteristics. This mind game had amused her since her college days. As she studied toward her geology degree, she'd taken some elective classes in the Department of Fine Arts just for fun. She could always draw well, even as a child, and had spent many adolescent years sitting in her room doing pen and ink landscapes, nature studies, or portraits.

During the art classes she had realized that she liked to draw humongous, snaggle-toothed reptiles with attitude rather than petite human models with great orthodontia and stunted personalities. From that moment on her desire to be a paleoartist had bloomed into a full-blown passion.

In her mind's eye, Lydia was like a Panoplosaurus dinosaur: stout, non-threatening, social. Ansel likened Shane to Ornitholestes: a bird-like loner and hunter with a tendency to snap. She smiled as she gazed at Tim. He was the Deinonychus of the group: attractive-looking and social, quick, strong, and very good with his hands.

"We're standing at the southeast tip of a geological area known as the Hell Creek Formation, one of two Montana sites containing Cretaceous Period dinosaur fossils," Ansel began. "At one time all of Montana was an inland sea. Over millions of years, this sea retreated eastward, allowing sediments to accumulate in the shallow sea basins offshore. The bedrock here is mostly shale with a sandstone or mudstone covering, and it's perfect for finding fossilized dinosaur bones."

Ansel pointed behind her. "During the late Cretaceous, this field looked almost the same except there were streams running through it. These stream banks existed as heavily forested woodlands, but huge herds of Hadrosaurs roamed the open areas just like the buffalo herds of the eighteen hundreds. Carnivorous dinosaurs such as Allosaurus also hunted here."

Ansel pulled a pen and a battered red notebook from her rear pants pocket. "Today I want you to take your field notebooks and picks and survey the area looking for fossils. Remember, fossil hunting requires a keen power of observation. Focus your senses on detecting unnatural symmetries or characteristic fossil shapes and noticing differences in ground color and texture."

Shane sighed. "How are we supposed to do that?"

"Look in a systematic manner. Work the base of slopes and study the natural exposures. Examine the side light

striking them. Turn over rock fragments. Get on your hands and knees if you have to. Use back lighting to prevent fossils from becoming translucent so you don't miss them altogether. And if you find something, let me know. All of us should see the fossil as you first found it."

Ansel glanced at each student. "Before I let you go, I want to tell you about the Beastly Buffet at my father's ranch. It's next Saturday. You're all invited."

"Isn't that where everyone brings a food dish made from a weird animal?" Lydia asked.

"That's right. The food is made from exotic animals, birds, fish, or other creatures. The weirder the better as long as it's not made from an endangered species."

"How do we get there?" asked Tim.

Ansel pulled small paper sheets from the back of her field book. "The driving directions are on these." She handed a flier to each student. "Now let's go fossil hunting."

Lydia and Shane wandered off in different directions, but Tim remained. "Miss Phoenix, I was wondering if I could talk to you sometime about the Montana State University. I know you went there. I just got my Master's in zoology, and I want to go there for my doctorate."

"That's wonderful, Tim. Sure, I'd be glad to discuss the university with you. We could meet at my art studio. I'm free Monday afternoon."

"Great. What time?"

"How about two o'clock?"

"Perfect."

"Give me your flier, and I'll write my address."

Tim passed the paper, and Ansel scribbled across it. "I'll see you then. You'd better get hunting or those two will find something first," she said with a grin.

Tim nodded and walked off. Ansel took a moment to write site information in her battered field notebook. Thoughts of her missing Iniskim invaded her mind. She'd have to go back to Pitt's homestead and search the ground.

Moments later Ansel closed the notebook and looked around. Lydia was staring into a gully. Shane probed the edge of an interesting rock outcropping, kicking at shale chips littering the prairie. Tim halted on the open grassland and snapped pictures of the terrain and of his fellow searchers.

Ansel loved fieldwork despite its demands as an exacting science, and she really wanted to convey the same sense of excitement and adventure to her students. It appeared that Shane and Tim didn't quite grasp the concept of making fascinating paleontological discoveries. Only Lydia was enjoying this excursion. The geology student had hopped into the gully and was examining the ground with fierce concentration.

As she walked toward Lydia, Ansel slid the journal into her pocket and pulled out a fossil hammer hanging from the tool belt around her waist. She reached the gully's edge and looked down. "Find anything interesting?"

Lydia brushed a curly lock of brown hair away from her perspiring brow. "I see something in this hole. I think it's a piece of gold, Ms. Phoenix."

"Let me take a look."

Ansel jumped into the three-foot-wide wash, then kneeled beside the opening. Natural erosion had loosened the dirt beneath a six-inch-long shale overhang. She could see the flash of gold metal a foot away. An unpleasantly sweet odor wafted outward.

"I see it, Lydia. Stand back." Ansel got to her feet.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to open up the hole with my pick. This is wild prairie. I know people who've been bitten by poisonous snakes, badgers, and even black widow spiders because they weren't careful."

Ansel excavated the cavity, loose dirt falling easily away. She took several strikes at the rock overhang. Working the pick deeper into the gully wall, she finally exposed the mysterious object.

Lydia grimaced. "Shoot. It's just a pair of dirty, old glasses."

Ansel picked them up. The plastic lenses were scratched and dirt-smearred. The left lens had a spiderweb crack radiating from its center. Shane and Tim appeared above them.

“What’s going on?” Shane demanded.

Ansel glanced up. “Nothing much. We’ve uncovered some eyeglasses.”

Shane’s face twisted into a smirk. “Great going, Lydia. Which dinosaur wore those?”

“Let’s get back to fossil hunting,” Ansel said, trying to avoid any conflict.

Tim started to walk away and then stopped. “Geesh. What’s that smell?”

“Pigs,” Shane shot back. “What do you think?”

The rancid odor Ansel smelled earlier had returned full bore. She noticed Lydia’s straining effort to walk up the gully side. Her feet kept sinking deep into the loose soil. Curious, Ansel thought.

The wash had been dry since the March thaws, and it hadn’t rained in months. The rest of the gully was bone dry and hard-packed. Despite the arid conditions, the flora around the gully flourished in the late June weather. A verdant growth of range grass and prickly pear had claimed most of the wash. Except for the area surrounding the hole. It formed a dead patch.

Ansel stared at the broken glasses. New glasses. And that foul odor of decay. Her head snapped upward.

“Lydia, get off that wall right now.”

Lydia stopped abruptly. Loose dirt shifted beneath her. She began to slide as chert and rock debris gave way in an avalanche of loose ground. Ansel loped to her aid, reaching up a hand so the girl could grab it. She hauled Lydia onto firmer ground at the bottom of the gully.

“You all right?”

“Yeah, Ms. Phoenix.”

“Well, he’s not,” said Shane. He stared down at the new depression above Ansel and Lydia.

The dust-laden head of a man had emerged in the center of the collapsed gully wall. His swollen, pitted, and hideously mottled blue-green face protruded through the sandstone grit and gave the disconcerting illusion of being cut from marbled stone. Two angry, feasting sand scorpions scuttled out from the dirt around his chin. The three-inch-long, yellow and black arachnids snapped their pincers and twirled in a disjointed dance of death.

“Oh, my God.” Lydia threw her hands up to her face, shielding her senses from the sight and smell of the corpse.

Tim Shanks lifted his camera and clicked off a rapid succession of shots.

Ansel was too shocked to berate him. Her lungs sucked in rancid air while her mind tried to make sense of the hideous scene. The gold wire glasses. That face. Despite the disfiguring ravages of decay, she knew the man.

The glasses slipped from her fingers and fell with a thud next to the grave of her ex-lover.

Chapter 2

*“Everything on the earth has a purpose.
Every disease an herb to cure it,
And every person a mission.”*

Mourning Dove, Salish

Lieutenant Reid Dorbandt stared at the male victim decomposing in the gully. He reached to scratch an itch on his nose with a latex-gloved hand. No use. He kept forgetting that he was wearing a painter's half-mask because it did very little to keep foul fumes from entering his nose and mouth.

Bacteria had ballooned and pitted the corpse's flesh inside the jeans and long-sleeved shirt. Resourceful sand scorpions had also done a bang-up job of cutting skin off the exposed parts of the victim's face, neck, and hands, while burrowing beetles had gone for the soft parts. The eyes and lips were almost completely gone.

Dorbandt shook his head. The last thing he needed this morning was a murder that had *America's Most Wanted* potential. His heartburn shot acid up into his throat like a .38 Special loaded with dum-dum bullets, and he was certain that his gray, three-piece suit would never lose the downwind stench of pig feces and rotting man-meat even after drycleaning. He sighed and focused his eyes on the suited Doc Tweedy.

As the witnesses had been escorted to the farm house, the firefighters had cleared the dirt and territorial scorpions away from the corpse so the associate medical examiner could move in. The silver-haired Tweedy was on his knees in the gully, carefully palpating the victim's head. He resembled a giant, bug-eyed fruit fly inspecting a melon at the grocery store. At least he got to wear a full-faced floater's mask, Dorbandt thought with envy.

A small Crime Scene Unit and one other detective had moved into action, too, collecting evidence samples, taking photographs or site measurements, and sketching everything. Later they would collect more forensic clues from the corpse with forceps and vacuums. Yellow crime scene tape isolated a fifty-foot square running parallel to the wash and across the bottom. EMTs waited to bag the body and transport it to the coroner's office.

Murders weren't common in Lacrosse County, and Dorbandt felt like the site had become a freaking petting zoo. The only element missing was the predatory howl of circling reporters. Upon his arrival, he had assigned two uniforms to contain the scene. So far the rookies had done a good job, but with news like this traveling over police bands, it wouldn't last long.

At last Doc Tweedy left the body, stepped over the tape, and tossed his mask onto the ground before gazing at Dorbandt. "He's dead."

"So my suspicions are confirmed." It never failed to irk Dorbandt that MEs appeared at homicides to proclaim the obvious so that the real investigative work could begin. What a cushy job. "What killed him?"

Tweedy snapped off his fluid-stained rubber gloves. Then he pushed them into a plastic bag for disposal in a bio-hazard container carried by the CSU. "You're not going to like it."

"I rarely do."

"I don't know for sure."

Dorbandt's eyebrows rose. "No kidding?"

“No kidding.” Tweedy picked up his bag, floater’s mask, and clipboard. “Let’s move upwind. He stinks worse than sheep shit in July.”

Tweedy walked toward his unmarked car, positioning the clipboard so he could sign the top sheet with a flourish, officially authorizing a post-mortem exam. They stopped twenty yards from the makeshift grave.

“Now where was I?”

Dorbandt pulled off his mask, snapping one ear painfully with the elastic strap. Except for the reek of pig, the air smelled better. “You don’t know what killed him.”

Tweedy nodded. “That’s right, but I found an ante-mortem puncture on the back of his neck. Looks like a needle hole.”

“Somebody gave him a shot?”

“Yeah. Might have been a sedative or a narcotic to get him out here without a fuss. Might have been something else altogether.” Tweedy gazed back at the victim.

Dorbandt grimaced. “Shit. When you get that faraway stare, I know two and two won’t add up to four. What’s eating you?”

“He’s got anterior and posterior post-mortem insect bites, but he’s also got an inordinate number of ante-mortem lacerations and bruises on the head, shoulder blades, back, buttocks, and calves. His fingernails are badly torn, and the palms and elbows took a pummeling. These aren’t defensive wounds, and they aren’t the result of being beaten or dragged. They came from a sustained trauma. I think they’re self-inflicted.”

“You think the drug caused him to thrash around?”

“I can’t be that specific. However, given this rocky terrain and his wounds, I do believe he suffered from convulsions or seizures. The toxicology screen will identify the drug.”

“Not much to work with.”

“Well, I know that he didn’t have an easy death. Who is he?”

“According to one of the witnesses, his name is Nicholas Capos. He was a botanist from Glasgow. Married. No children.”

“What a waste. Anything else you want to know?”

“How long has he been dead?”

“Hard to tell.” Tweedy spoke with consideration. “More than a couple weeks. The weather’s been cool so decomposition has slowed down, and there aren’t a lot of bugs. Howdun will have to give you an approximate time of death after his autopsy.”

Howdun was the deputy coroner. Since Sheriff Bucky Combs was also the elected county coroner and on a fishing vacation along the Kootenai River, Howdun had to fill in on this one. Dorbandt suspected Bucky would spit metal sutures when he learned how he’d missed doing the autopsy on one of the most gruesome homicides to pop up in years.

“Hokay. Thanks. One more thing, Doc. Have you got anything in your little black bag that cures heartburn? My stomach is killing me.”

“Sorry. You been eating a lot of chocolate?”

“Yeah. I’m a chocoholic,” Dorbandt admitted, thinking of the malted breakfast drink he had chugged down that morning.

Tweedy chuckled. “Chocolate’s the worst thing for a weak esophageal sphincter. It has a chemical in it that relaxes the stomach valve. I’ve seen plenty of stiffes with a one-way valve that swings like a doggy door. Take it easy, Reid.” The ME hobbled away.

“See you.”

An acid burp propelled past Dorbandt’s tonsils with nuclear intensity. That would teach him to share his gastrointestinal ills with a slice-and-dice man. Too much information. He slapped his notebook shut. He’d peruse the area and then get to the next pressing issue: interviewing witnesses.

From his shirt pocket, Dorbandt pulled a slip of paper which a deputy had handed him earlier. It contained preliminary information about the people who found Capos.

His eyes immediately locked on the first name. Anselette Phoenix.

No. It couldn't be. He had hoped his luck would change sometime today. Sure, Dorbandt ruminated, and black pigs could fly.



Ansel shifted uncomfortably in the wooden chair at Pitt's kitchen table and tried not to look overly nervous. After all, the detective introducing himself in a deep voice as Lieutenant Reid Dorbandt had to ask questions. The suited cop had nothing to do with the fact that her seat bore an unnerving likeness to a wooden electric chair. Lydia, Shane, and Tim had already been questioned and dismissed.

Three hours after finding the body it was her turn, and she felt sick to her stomach. Pitt's kitchen, though clean and orderly for a widower, smelled of greasy pork sausage. She was totally drained by disbelief, sadness, and worry. Losing her lucky stone had heralded more than just bad luck for herself. Who in the world would want Nick dead?

Dorbandt stared at her from his seat across the table. Ansel had seen that speculative gaze a hundred times. Her mixed Blackfoot heritage, evident in her high cheekbones, caramel skin, and raven hair, often evoked curiosity. Dorbandt was sizing her up, and she met his blue eyes without hesitation.

Ansel gave Dorbandt the once over, too. When standing, he looked over six feet. Early thirties with brown hair clipped into a short, squeaky-clean professional cut. He looked hot and tired. A brown holster strapped beneath his right shoulder told Ansel that he was a lefty. It was also a grim reminder of the seriousness of the situation.

Dorbandt fixed her with an unblinking stare. "Are you related to Chase Phoenix?"

Ansel tensed, surprised by Dorbandt's first question. "I'm his daughter. Do you know my father?"

"I've never met the guy. Just heard of him. He owns a big cattle ranch, doesn't he?"

"Yes. The Arrowhead. Who mentioned his name?"

"My supervisor. Captain Ed McKenzie."

"McKenzie is my father's friend?"

"I don't think so." A strange smile softened the edges of Dorbandt's square jaw line. "I didn't know he had a daughter."

"I went to college and worked out of state, but I've been back in Big Toe for two years."

Dorbandt pulled out a pen and leather pad. "I need to verify information. You don't mind if I make notes, do you?"

"No."

"You're Anselette Sarcee Phoenix. Home address is 77 Platte Road. Born December 14th, 1973?"

"Yes."

"What's your occupation?"

"I'm a freelance paleoartist doing fossil artwork for magazines, books, and museums."

"I'm curious. Where'd you go to school to learn all this?"

"Montana State University in Bozeman."

Dorbandt scribbled in his notebook. "Bozeman. Isn't that where that famous fossil hunter works? The guy who dug up all those dinosaur nests."

"Jack Horner?"

"Yeah. You ever meet him?"

"Yes. He's the curator of paleontology at the Museum of the Rockies. It's affiliated with the university."

"Hokay. What were you doing in Pitt's field this morning, Miss Phoenix?"

"I was conducting a field seminar in fossil hunting for the Pangaea Society. I'm the president."

"What does this society do?"

"We're a non-profit, community-based organization devoted to the study of fossils. We try to advance the state of the science, educate the public, and collect and identify fossil specimens."

“Can anyone join this society?”

“Yes. It’s open to any interested amateurs or professionals. Even children.”

Ansel continued to answer as Dorbandt’s questions led her up to Lydia’s discovery of the hole in the gully, and she began to shiver inside the stuffy little room. “Lydia saw something gold inside the hole. I saw it, too, but couldn’t tell what it was so I used my pick hammer to open the entrance. There was an unpleasant smell.”

Dorbandt looked at her with new intensity. “Go on.”

“I found a pair of broken glasses.”

“Then what happened?”

“Lydia walked up the side of the wash. The dirt kept moving under her. That’s when I knew something was wrong.”

“Why?”

“The smell got worse, and I noticed that the rest of the gully was hard-packed and choked with vegetation. I wondered about this barren patch above the hole. On my father’s ranch we called circular, dead spots like that beef cakes.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it’s the spot where a cow dies and decomposes for a couple weeks. The body fat liquefies and leaches into the ground. This causes the soil to become so acid that nothing will grow there. The same happens if you bury a cow close to the surface. I realized it was a grave.”

“How did you discover the body?”

“The dirt wall collapsed, and we saw Nick’s face. I couldn’t believe it. I still don’t.”

“You called 911?”

Ansel nodded. “I went back to my truck and used the cell phone. A sheriff’s officer arrived twenty minutes later.”

Changing tracks efficiently, Dorbandt asked, “You told this officer that Capos was a botanist. Do you know where he worked?”

“Yes. He worked at the Montana Monitoring Cooperative in Glasgow.”

Dorbandt scribbled. "Did Capos belong to your society?"

"Yes. He was the vice president."

"How long was he a member?"

"About four years."

"And what was your relationship with Capos, Miss Phoenix?"

Ansel's mouth went dry. Now what she going to say? She'd only slept with Nick one night. He had simply caught her at a weak moment, and she'd been drinking. After that one lapse of good sense, they had returned to being just friends.

"I was a friend and colleague."

"When did you last see or talk to him?"

"About three weeks ago. At the last board meeting for society officers held at my workshop. June second. Eight to ten in the evening."

"How did Capos act?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was he unusually sad, excited, or angry about anything?"

"Perfectly normal as far as I can remember," Ansel said honestly.

"Did Capos have any problems with other members?"

Ansel tensed again. Police interview or not, she didn't like spreading gossip. She wanted to go home. Her stomach felt better, but a dull ache pounded in her left temple.

"Nick didn't get along with Dr. Cameron Bieselmore, but Cam isn't an easy person to deal with."

"Spell that last name for me, please." When she did, he asked, "What was the problem between them?"

"Cameron is the director of the Big Toe Natural History Museum. He hired Nick to design the plant displays surrounding some dinosaur models. Nick wanted to include some ideas in the dioramas Cameron didn't like. They argued, and Nick walked off the project. The delay cost a lot of extra time and money."

"When did this happen?"

"June of last year."

“Who else did Capos have a problem with?”

“I don’t know. He rarely discussed his problems with me.”

“And his wife’s name is Karen?”

Karen. She hadn’t thought much about her. What would she do now that Nick was dead? “That’s right.”

“How did he get along with her?”

“Not well. Nick left Karen about six months ago. He moved to Wolf Point.”

“Capos’ license says his home is in Glasgow. Is that where Karen still lives?”

Ansel suddenly felt a million miles away from the tiny kitchen. Talking about Nick made the reality of what happened begin to sink in. She wouldn’t see him again. She’d never see his boyish, lopsided smile or hear him say her name. They would never again discuss the latest fossil finds or go hiking together. Damn it. Some monster worse than any prehistoric nightmare she could imagine had killed Nick. Ansel felt a deep, dark rage building inside her. Whoever killed Nick deserved to pay.

“Miss Phoenix?”

Ansel jerked to attention. “Yes?”

“Does his wife live in Glasgow?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know Capos’ Wolf Point address?”

“No. I’ve never been there.”

Dorbandt pursed his lips before speaking again. “All right. I need you to give me a list with the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the society members as soon as possible.”

“Sure. Give me your email address.”

“My card.” Dorbandt pulled a white rectangle from his notebook and pushed it across the table. “If you think of anything important regarding Capos, call me.”

“I will.” Her head was coming off at the shoulders. She really needed to eat something.

“I’ll write up your statement and have you sign it. Then we’ll get your fingerprints.”

Ansel swallowed the lump in her throat. "Why?"

"Because you picked up those glasses. I want you to understand that this is an active homicide investigation. You are not to discuss anything you've seen or heard. Is that clear?" He fixed her with a stern gaze.

"Yes," Ansel replied, feeling swept helplessly along in a procedural eddy.

Dorbandt shut his notebook and pulled a white paper from a file folder on the table. He took several minutes quietly writing before looking up. "Please read this and make sure everything is correct. If you agree with it, sign at the bottom." He slid the paper toward her.

Ansel took the form and looked it over. It was riddled with police jargon. She signed anyway and pushed the sheet back.

The detective scribbled his name below hers. "Thank you." He got up and walked to the kitchen doorway. "Odie, I need you to get some prints from Miss Phoenix."

As Dorbandt withdrew into the kitchen, a huge, suited detective appeared. "Come this way, please."

He led Ansel through the living room. She passed Feltus Pitt and nodded a quick farewell in his direction. Feltus didn't look happy as he sat on a swayback sofa drinking a can of orange soda, his eyes as wide as a swine in a slaughterhouse. She felt awful for the pig farmer. What a horrible thing to happen on his property. There went the society's fossil hunting privileges.

After her fingerprints were taken, Ansel departed through the front door. She walked across the rickety farmhouse porch and down the wooden steps feeling shell-shocked. Only the smell and sound of thousands of keening pigs pierced her dazed senses. The odor didn't seem to affect anyone else.

Crime scene personnel used the house as their headquarters and milled around on the porch or ate lunch in the shade cast by larger vehicles. Drinks and deli sandwiches flowed like manna from heaven among the lethargic county employees.

Despite the stink swirling around her, Ansel's mouth watered. She watched with unabated lust as a short, balding fireman in tan overalls passed her taking large bites of a salami and cheese sub. Her stomach growled.

Ansel finally hopped into the scalding truck cab and surveyed the trampled yard. If her Iniskim had fallen off here, the chances of finding it in one piece looked hopeless. The blue stone had been mounted on a silver backing with a four-pronged clasp arrangement. Most likely it had been destroyed under the boot of some Lacrosse County drone. She whispered a foul curse beneath her breath.

Just as she started the Ford's engine, Lydia tapped on her driver's window, motioning wildly for her to roll it down. "Lydia, I thought you'd left. Are you all right?"

"Ms. Phoenix, I've got to talk to you."

"What about?"

"About this dead guy."

"Nick Capos? What about him?"

"I can't talk here."

"My email address is on the seminar outline." Ansel's head pounded. She felt gray cells dying with every passing second.

"I know. I need to talk to you by phone. What's your number?"

"Just a second." Ansel scabbled through the junk thrown on the dash with black-smudged fingertips. Damn that ink. At last she found a beat-up business card and passed the sun-faded paper to Lydia.

"Thanks. Bye."

"Lydia," she called, but the student had spun away, disappearing within a mire of vehicles. What was that all about?

Ansel rolled up the window, set the air conditioning to arctic freeze, and began the spine-jarring trek down the washboard drive toward the main highway. A minute later she saw a ribbon of asphalt. She also spied a squad car, two deputies, and a white WBTV news van with a satellite dish

on the roof. Her wildly thumping heart leaped into her stomach.

The press. Radio. Newspapers. Television.

What would happen to the Pangaea Society's plans to construct the Preston Opel Paleohistory Center when the media bombshell about Nick's murder hit the airwaves? The Pangaea Society was supposed to receive three hundred thousand dollars next week that would make the construction of the public visitor center possible. Three years of planning, community support, and financial finagling could be obliterated in an instant.

Ansel punched the accelerator, and the truck skimmed past the police and reporters. Once on the main road, she headed at warp speed toward Big Toe. She also reached for her trusty cell phone stashed in a cup holder on the center console. Her plans to eat lunch, take a quick shower, and grab a nap dissolved.

She had to call an emergency meeting of the society officers right away. Before the cow chip hit the fan.