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Birthright

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Extract

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One

The Antietam Creek Project came to a rude halt when the blade of Billy Younger's backhoe unearthed the first skull.

It was an unpleasant surprise for Billy himself, who'd been squatting in the cage of his machine, sweating and cursing in the vicious July heat. His wife was staunchly opposed to the proposed subdivision and had given him her usual high-pitched lecture that morning while he'd tried to eat his fried eggs and link sausage.

For himself, Billy didn't give a rat's ass one way or the other about the subdivision. But a job was a job, and Dolan was paying a good wage. Almost good enough to make up for Missy's constant bitching.

Damn nagging had put him off his breakfast, and a man needed a good breakfast when he was going to be working his tail off the rest of the day.

And what he had managed to slurp up before Missy nagged away his appetite was sitting uneasily in his gut, stewed, he thought bitterly, in the goddamn wet heat.

He rammed the controls, had the satisfaction of knowing his machine would never bitch his ears off for trying to do the job. Nothing suited Billy better, even in the god-awful sweaty clutch of July, than plowing that big-ass blade into the ground, feeling it take a good bite.

But scooping up a dirty, empty-eyed skull along with the rich bottomland soil, having it leer at him in that white blast of midsummer sunlight was enough to have 233-pound Billy scream like a girl and leap down from the machine as nimbly as a dancer.

His co-workers would razz him about it unmercifully until he was forced to bloody his best friend's nose in order to regain his manhood.

But on that July afternoon, he'd run over the site with the same speed and determination, and damn near the agility, he'd possessed on the football field during his high school heyday.

When he'd regained his breath and coherency, he reported to his foreman, and his foreman reported to Ronald Dolan.

By the time the county sheriff arrived, several other bones had been exhumed by curious laborers. The medical examiner was sent for, and a local news team arrived to interview Billy, Dolan and whoever else could help fill up the airtime on the evening report.

Word spread. There was talk of murder, mass graves, serial killers. Eager fingers squeezed juice out of the grapevine so that when the examination was complete, and the bones were deemed very old, a number of people weren't sure if they were pleased or disappointed.

But for Dolan, who'd already fought through petitions, protests and injunctions to turn the pristine fifty acres of boggy bottomland and woods into a housing development, the age of the bones didn't matter.

Their very existence was a major pain in his ass.

And when two days later Lana Campbell, the transplanted city lawyer, crossed her legs and gave him a smug smile, it was all Dolan could do not to pop her in her pretty face.

"You'll find the court order fairly straightforward," she told him, and kept the smile in place. She'd been one of the loudest voices against the development. At the moment, she had quite a bit to smile about.

"You don't need a court order. I stopped work. I'm cooperating with the police and the planning commission."

"Let's just consider this an additional safety measure. The County Planning Commission has given you sixty days to file a report and to convince them that your development should continue."

"I know the ropes, sweetheart. Dolan's been building houses in this county for forty-six years."

He called her "sweetheart" to annoy her. Because they both knew it, Lana only grinned. "The Historical and Preservation Societies have retained me. I'm doing my job. Members of the faculty from the University of Maryland archaeology and anthropology departments will be visiting the site. As liaison, I'm asking you to allow them to remove and test samples."

"Attorney of record, liaison." Dolan, a strongly built man with a ruddy, Irish face, leaned back in his desk chair. Sarcasm dripped from his voice. "Busy lady."

He hooked his thumbs in his suspenders. He always wore red suspenders over a blue work shirt. Part of the uniform, as he thought of it. Part of what made him one of the common men, the working class that had made his town, and his country, great.

Whatever his bank balance, and he knew it to the penny, he didn't need fancy clothes to show himself off.

He still drove a pickup truck. American-made.

He'd been born and raised in Woodsboro, unlike the pretty city lawyer. And he didn't need her, or anybody else, to tell him what his community needed. The fact was, he knew better than a lot of the people in the community about what was best for Woodsboro.

He was a man who looked to the future, and took care of his own.

"We're both busy people, so I'll come straight to the point." Lana was dead sure she was about to wipe that patronizing grin off Dolan's face. "You can't proceed on your development until the site is examined and cleared by the county. Samples need to be taken for that to happen. Any artifacts excavated won't be of any use to you. Cooperation in this matter would, we both know, go a long way toward shoring up your PR troubles."

"I don't look at them as troubles." He spread his big workingman's hands. "People need homes. The community needs jobs. The Antietam Creek development provides both. It's called progress."

"Thirty new homes. More traffic on roads not equipped to handle it, already overcrowded schools, the loss of rural sensibilities and open space."

The "sweetheart" hadn't gotten a rise out of her, but the old argument did. She drew a breath, let it out slowly. "The community fought against it. It's called quality of life. But that's another matter," she said before he could respond. "Until the bones are tested and dated, you're stuck." She tapped a finger on the court order. "Dolan Development must want that process expedited. You'll want to pay for the testing. Radiocarbon dating."

"Pay—"

Yeah, she thought, who's the winner now? "You own the property. You own the artifacts." She'd done her homework. "You know we'll fight against the construction, bury you in court orders and briefs until this is settled. Pay the two dollars, Mr. Dolan," she added as she got to her feet. "Your attorneys are going to give you the same advice."

Lana waited until she had closed the office door behind her before letting the grin spread across her face. She strolled out, took a deep breath of thick summer air as she gazed up and down Woodsboro's Main Street.

She refrained from doing a happy dance—too undignified—but she nearly skipped down the sidewalk like a ten-year-old. This was *her* town now. Her community. Her home. And had been since she'd moved there from Baltimore two years before.

It was a good town, steeped in tradition and history, fueled by gossip, protected from the urban sprawl by distance and the looming shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Coming to Woodsboro had been a huge leap of faith for a born and bred city girl. But she couldn't bear the memories in Baltimore after losing her husband. Steve's death had flattened her. It had taken her nearly six months to find her feet again, to pull herself out of the sticky haze of grief and deal with life.

And life demanded, Lana thought. She missed Steve. There was still a hole in her where he'd been. But she'd had to keep breathing, keep functioning. And there was Tyler. Her baby. Her boy. Her treasure.

She couldn't bring back his daddy, but she could give him the best childhood possible.

He had room to run now, and a dog to run with. Neighbors and friends,

and a mother who'd do whatever needed to be done to keep him safe and happy.

She checked her watch as she walked. It was Ty's day to go to his friend Brock's after preschool. She'd give Brock's mother, Jo, a call in an hour. Just to make sure everything was all right.

She paused at the intersection, waited for the light. Traffic was slow, as traffic was meant to be in small towns.

She didn't look small-town. Her wardrobe had once been selected to suit the image of an up-and-coming lawyer in a major urban firm. She might have hung out her shingle in a little rural dot of less than four thousand people, but that didn't mean she couldn't continue to dress for success.

She wore a summer blue suit in crisp linen. The classic tailoring complemented her delicate build and her own sense of tidiness. Her hair was a straight swing of sunny blond that brushed the jawline of a pretty, youthful face. She had round blue eyes that were often mistaken for guileless, a nose that tipped up at the end and a deeply curved mouth.

She swung into Treasured Pages, beamed at the man behind the counter. And finally did her victory dance.

Roger Grogan took off his reading glasses and raised his bushy silver eyebrows. He was a trim and vigorous seventy-five, and his face made Lana think of a canny leprechaun.

He wore a short-sleeved white shirt, and his hair, a beautiful mix of silver and white, exploded in untamed tufts.

"You look pretty full of yourself." His voice was gravel spilling down a steel chute. "Must've seen Ron Dolan."

"Just came from there." She indulged herself with another spin before she leaned on the counter. "You should've come with me, Roger. Just to see his face."

"You're too hard on him." Roger tapped a fingertip to Lana's nose. "He's just doing what he thinks is right."

When Lana merely angled her head, stared blandly, Roger laughed. "Didn't say I agreed with him. Boy's got a hard head, just like his old man did. Doesn't have the sense to see if a community's this divided over something, you need to rethink."

"He'll be rethinking now," Lana promised. "Testing and dating those

bones is going to cause him some major delays. And if we're lucky, they're going to be old enough to draw a lot of attention—national attention—to the site. We can delay the development for months. Maybe years."

"He's as hardheaded as you. You managed to hold him up for months already."

"He says it's progress," she mumbled.

"He's not alone in that."

"Alone or not, he's wrong. You can't plant houses like a corn crop. Our projections show—"

Roger held up a hand. "Preaching to the choir, counselor."

"Yeah." She let out a breath. "Once we get the archaeological survey, we'll see what we see. I can't wait. Meanwhile, the longer the development's delayed, the more Dolan loses. And the more time we have to raise money. He might just reconsider selling that land to the Woodsboro Preservation Society."

She pushed back her hair. "Why don't you let me take you to lunch? We can celebrate today's victory."

"Why aren't you letting some young, good-looking guy take *you* out to lunch?"

"Because I lost my heart to you, Roger, the first time I saw you." It wasn't far from the truth. "In fact, hell with lunch. Let's you and me run off to Aruba together."

It made him chuckle, nearly made him blush. He'd lost his wife the same year Lana had lost her husband. He often wondered if that was part of the reason for the bond that had forged between them so quickly.

He admired her sharp mind, her stubborn streak, her absolute devotion to her son. He had a granddaughter right about her age, he thought. Somewhere.

"That'd set this town on its ear, wouldn't it? Be the biggest thing since the Methodist minister got caught playing patty-cake with the choir director. But the fact is, I've got books to catalogue—just in. Don't have time for lunch or tropical islands."

"I didn't know you'd gotten new stock. Is this one?" At his nod, she gently turned the book around.

Roger dealt in rare books, and his tiny shop was a small cathedral to them. It smelled, always, of old leather and old paper and the Old Spice he'd been sprinkling on his skin for sixty years.

A rare bookstore wasn't the sort of thing expected in a two-stoplight rural town. Lana knew the bulk of his clientele came, like his stock, from much farther afield.

"It's beautiful." She traced a finger over the leather binding. "Where did it come from?"

"An estate in Chicago." His ears pricked at a sound at the rear of the shop. "But it came with something even more valuable."

He waited, heard the door between the shop and the stairs to the living quarters on the second floor open. Lana saw the pleasure light up his face, and turned.

He had a face of deep valleys and strong hills. His hair was very dark brown with gilt lights in it. The type, she imagined, that would go silver and white with age. There was a rumpled mass of it that brushed the collar of his shirt.

The eyes were deep, dark brown, and at the moment seemed a bit surly. As did his mouth. It was a face, Lana mused, that mirrored both intellect and will. Smart and stubborn, was her first analysis. But perhaps, she admitted, it was because Roger had often described his grandson as just that.

The fact that he looked as if he'd just rolled out of bed and hitched on a pair of old jeans as an afterthought added sexy to the mix.

She felt a pleasant little ripple in the blood she hadn't experienced in a very long time.

"Doug." There was pride, delight and love in the single word. "Wondered when you were going to wander down. Good timing, as it happens. This is Lana. I told you about our Lana. Lana Campbell, my grandson, Doug Cullen."

"It's nice to meet you." She offered a hand. "We've missed each other whenever you've popped back home since I moved to Woodsboro."

He shook her hand, scanned her face. "You're the lawyer."

"Guilty. I just stopped in to tell Roger the latest on the Dolan development. And to hit on him. How long are you in town?"

"I'm not sure."

A man of few words, she thought, and tried again. "You do a lot of traveling, acquiring and selling antiquarian books. It must be fascinating."

"I like it."

Roger leaped into the awkward pause. "I don't know what I'd do without Doug. Can't get around like I used to. He's got a feel for the business, too. A natural feel. I'd be retired and boring myself to death if he hadn't taken up the fieldwork."

"It must be satisfying for both of you, to share an interest, and a family business." Since Douglas looked bored by the conversation, Lana turned to his grandfather. "Well, Roger, since you've blown me off, again, I'd better get back to work. See you at the meeting tomorrow night?"

"I'll be there."

"Nice meeting you, Doug."

"Yeah. See you around."

When the door closed behind her, Roger let out a steam-kettle sigh. "'See you around'? That's the best you can do when you're talking to a pretty woman? You're breaking my heart, boy."

"There's no coffee. Upstairs. No coffee. No brain. I'm lucky I can speak in simple declarative sentences."

"Got a pot in the back room," Roger said in disgust, and jerked a thumb. "That girl's smart, pretty, interesting and," he added as Doug moved behind the counter and through the door, "available."

"I'm not looking for a woman." The scent of coffee hit his senses and nearly made him weep. He poured a cup, burned his tongue on the first sip and knew all would, once again, be right with the world.

He sipped again, glancing back at his grandfather. "Pretty fancy piece for Woodsboro."

"I thought you weren't looking."

Now he grinned, and it changed his face from surly to approachable. "Looking, seeing. Different kettle."

"She knows how to put herself together. Doesn't make her fancy."

"No offense." Douglas was amused by his grandfather's huffy tone. "I didn't know she was your girlfriend."

"I was your age, she damn well would be."

"Grandpa." Revived by the coffee, Doug slung an arm over Roger's shoulders. "Age doesn't mean squat. I say you should go for it. Okay if I take this upstairs? I need to go clean up, head out to see Mom."

"Yeah, yeah." Roger waved him off. "See you around," he muttered as Doug walked to the rear of the store. "Pitiful."

Callie Dunbrook sucked up the last of her Diet Pepsi as she fought Baltimore traffic. She'd timed her departure from Philadelphia—where she was supposed to be taking a three-month sabbatical—poorly. She saw that now.

But when the call had come through, requesting a consultation, she hadn't considered travel time or rush-hour traffic. Or the basic insanity of the Baltimore Beltway at four-fifteen on a Wednesday afternoon.

Now she just had to deal with it.

She did so by blasting her horn and propelling her old and beloved Land Rover into an opening more suited to a Tonka toy. The dark thoughts of the driver she cut off didn't concern her in the least.

She'd been out of the field for seven weeks. Even the whiff of a chance to be back in again drove her as ruthlessly as she drove the four-wheeler.

She knew Leo Greenbaum well enough to have recognized the restrained excitement in his voice. Well enough to know he wasn't a man to ask her to drive to Baltimore to look at some bones unless they were very interesting bones.

Since she hadn't heard a murmur about the find in rural Maryland until that morning, she had a feeling no one had expected them to be particularly interesting.

God knew she needed another project. She was bored brainless writing papers for journals, lecturing, reading papers others in her field had written for the same journals. Archaeology wasn't classroom and publishing to Callie. To her it was digging, measuring, boiling in the sun, drowning in the rain, sinking in mud and being eaten alive by insects.

To her, it was heaven.

When the radio station she had on segued into a news cycle, she switched to CDs. Talk wasn't any way to deal with vicious, ugly traffic. Snarling, mean-edged rock was.

Metallica snapped out, and instantly improved her mood.

She tapped her fingers on the wheel, then gripped it and punched through another opening. Her eyes, a deep, golden brown, gleamed behind her shaded glasses.

She wore her hair long because it was easier to pull it back or bunch it up under a hat—as it was now—than to worry about cutting and styling it. She also had enough healthy vanity to know the straight honey blond suited her.

Her eyes were long, the brows over them nearly straight. As she approached thirty, her face had mellowed from cute to attractive. When she smiled, three dimples popped out. One in each tanned cheek, and the third just above the right corner of her mouth.

The gently curved chin didn't reveal what her ex-husband had called her rock-brained stubbornness.

But then again, she could say the same about him. And did, at every possible opportunity.

She tapped the brakes and swung, with barely any decrease in speed, into a parking lot.

Leonard G. Greenbaum and Associates was housed in a ten-story steel box that had, to Callie's mind, no redeeming aesthetic value. But the lab and its technicians were among the best in the country.

She pulled into a visitor's slot, hopped out into a vicious, soupy heat. Her feet began to sweat inside her Wolverines before she made it to the building's entrance.

The building's receptionist glanced over, saw a woman with a compact, athletic body, an ugly straw hat and terrific wire-framed sunglasses.

"Dr. Dunbrook for Dr. Greenbaum."

"Sign in, please."

She handed Callie a visitor's pass. "Third floor."

Callie glanced at her watch as she strode to the elevators. She was only forty-five minutes later than she'd planned to be. But the Quarter Pounder she'd wolfed down on the drive was rapidly wearing off.

She wondered if she could hit Leo up for a meal.

She rode up to three, found another receptionist. This time she was asked to wait.

She was good at waiting. All right, Callie admitted as she dropped into a chair. Better at waiting than she'd once been. She used up her store of patience in her work. Could she help it if there wasn't much left over to spread around in other areas?

She could only work with what she had.

But Leo didn't keep her long.

He had a quick walk. It always reminded Callie of the way a corgi moved—rapid, stubby legs racing too fast for the rest of the body. At five-four, he was an inch shorter than Callie herself and had a sleeked-back mane of walnut-brown hair, which he unashamedly dyed. His face was weathered, sun-beaten and narrow with his brown eyes in a permanent squint behind square, rimless glasses.

He wore, as he did habitually, baggy brown pants and a shirt of wrinkled cotton. Papers leaked out of every pocket.

He walked straight up to Callie and kissed her—and was the only man of her acquaintance not related to her who was permitted to do so.

"Looking good, Blondie."

"You're not looking so bad yourself."

"How was the drive?"

"Vicious. Make it worth my while, Leo."

"Oh, I think I will. How's the family?" he asked as he led her back the way he'd come.

"Great. Mom and Dad got out of Dodge for a couple weeks. Beating the heat up in Maine. How's Clara?"

Leo shook his head at the thought of his wife. "She's taken up pottery. Expect a very ugly vase for Christmas."

"And the kids?"

"Ben's playing with stocks and bonds, Melissa's juggling motherhood and dentistry. How did an old digger like me raise such normal kids?"

"Clara," Callie told him as he opened a door and gestured her in.

Though she'd expected him to take her to one of the labs, she looked around his sunny, well-appointed office. "I'd forgotten what a slick setup you've got here, Leo. No burning desire to go back out and dig?"

"Oh, it comes over me now and again. Usually I just take a nap and it goes away. But this time . . . Take a look at this."

He walked behind his desk, unlocked a drawer. He drew out a bone fragment in a sealed bag.

Callie took the bag and, hooking her glasses in the V of her shirt, examined the bone within. "Looks like part of a tibia. Given the size and fusion, probably from a young female. Very well preserved."

"Best guess of age from visual study?"

"This is from western Maryland, right? Near a running creek. I don't like best guess. You got soil samples, stratigraphic report?"

"Ballpark. Come on, Blondie, play."

"Jeez." Her brow knitted as she turned the bag over in her hand. She wanted her fingers on bone. Her foot began to tap to her own inner rhythm. "I don't know the ground. Visual study, without benefit of testing, I'd make it three to five hundred years old. Could be somewhat older, depending on the silt deposits, the floodplain."

She turned the bone over again, and her instincts began to quiver. "That's Civil War country, isn't it? This predates that. It's not from a Rebel soldier boy."

"It predates the Civil War," Leo agreed. "By about five thousand years."

When Callie's head came up, he grinned at her like a lunatic. "Radiocarbon-dating report," he said, and handed her a file.

Callie scanned the pages, noted that Leo had run the test twice, on three different samples taken from the site.

When she looked up again, she had the same maniacal grin as he. "Hot dog," she said.