

## *Josie's Boys*

Phin watched bemusedly as the two boys emptied the contents of their bulging pockets onto the scarred wooden table. He sorted through the mess, discarding rocks, sticks and crumbly leaves. Eight-year-old Todd had a very broad understanding of what Phin needed and he pocketed anything that looked interesting. The resulting leftovers were a motley assemblage of broken rib bones and vertebrae from local deer or raccoons. He wondered where they managed to uncover so many more bones than he'd been able to find in the local woods.

Phin picked up a few of the smaller pieces and nodded his satisfaction, earning him a pair of nearly identical grins. He used very few of the bones the boys brought, but had learned that choosing only the specific pieces he wanted resulted in the boys demanding individual payment for each bone. It was cheaper to pay for the entire haul and dispose of the remains later.

"What's in the bundle?" he asked.

Charlie grinned and carefully set the bundle he'd been cradling against his chest on the table. Where Todd was a generous boy and picked up anything in the woods he thought Phin might like, his brother was clearly out to make some cash.

"This is the best part," Charlie said excitedly. He unrolled the stained towel, exposing a pile of bleached bones and a folded sheet of paper. He flattened the paper and quickly arranged the bones to match the diagram on the page. When he was satisfied he slid the paper over to Phin. "The whole skeleton is there," he said. "There's not a single bone missing."

"What was it?"

"It's Rupert, my pet rabbit. He died a long time ago."

"Why do you still have Rupert's skeleton and why is it so clean?"

"I dug him up last week," he said proudly. "I read on the Internet how to boil it first to get the last bits of flesh off and then bleach the bones so they won't look bloodstained."

"It was really stinky," Todd said solemnly.

Phin opened his mouth but snapped it shut when he realized he had no idea how to respond to that. Would Josie have allowed her son to boil and then bleach a skeleton he had dug out of the ground? Did she even know he'd done it? He hoped the boy had at least cleaned the pot when he'd finished his dubious rabbit stew.

"I have a bunny too," Todd chimed in. "His name was Eddie and you can have him too if you want."

His brother pushed him aside roughly. "Don't be dumb," Charlie said. "I told you he doesn't want your stupid dead rabbit. Eddie only died last month. He's not even a real skeleton yet."

Phin tried not to smile, grateful to Charlie for preventing his brother from digging up what was probably a juicily decomposing rabbit by now. He felt a little sorry for Todd, whose eyes were glistening with tears, though he couldn't tell whether from the loss of his pet rabbit or the rebuke.

He eyed the pile on the table, mentally tallying up what was useful and how much he should offer. "I'll give you two bucks for the lot," he said with a straight face, knowing that they would protest whatever he offered. He wasn't disappointed.

"You gotta be kidding!" Todd exclaimed, stamping around the yard and waving his arms. It was his standard reaction and never varied.

"Not enough," Charlie said flatly and crossed his arms.

"It's mostly broken bits of bones and rocks," Phin said. "Take it or leave it."

"The rabbit alone is worth at least ten bucks." The boy picked up the rabbit skull and thrust it at Phin, who reached out to take it from him.

"Most of that skeleton is too fragile to be of..." he faltered as his fingers gripped the skull, and his breath caught in his throat. An intense vibration emanated from the tiny bone. The tremor ran up his arm and slammed into his chest and belly. His heart rate spiked and he felt a sudden urge to run like hell for the nearest hole, coupled with a hunger so all-encompassing he barely stopped himself from stuffing the rabbit skull into his mouth.

He dropped the skull on the table and earned a scowl from Charlie, who gently lined it up with the rest of the skeleton.

"Ten for the rabbit and *five* for the rest," the boy insisted.

Phin took a shuddering breath. Still unable to speak, he dug into his pocket and pulled out a few wrinkled bills. He thrust a ten and a five at Charlie, who snatched the money and ran off with Todd in pursuit, yelling for his share.

Phin reached a trembling hand toward the rabbit skull and felt such a sudden gut-wrenching terror again that he nearly wet himself. He pulled his hand back and the terror eased. Mostly. This skull was smaller than his fox skull but packed a huge punch. Where the fox had been crushed by a falling woodpile, the rabbit had likely been killed by a half-starved predator, judging by the desperate hunger mixed in with the rabbit's fear.

He nearly leapt out of his skin when a voice called to him from the other side of the closest cabin.

"That little con artist played you like a badly-tuned violin," Toby drawled.

Phin concentrated on breathing slowly so that his heart might take the hint and stop jackhammering his ribcage.

"Most of this is crap – I heard you say so – and yet you accepted his ridiculous counteroffer." Toby picked up the tiny rabbit skull and Phin lurched to his feet, ready to slap it away from his hand, but his friend was examining the skull closely and without any apparent side effects.

"He really did do a very good job of cleaning these bones," Toby said, glancing toward the road where the boys had disappeared. "Con artist might be too mild a term for that boy."