

**SKINS AND BONES**

by

Ruth McKee

[RuthAMcKee@aol.com](mailto:RuthAMcKee@aol.com)

*The Hall of African Mammals at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. HENRY, 30ish, a paleontologist out of 1929 sits on a bench, staring at the Greater Kudu. Hildy, a fellow paleontologist, enters in a panic.*

HILDY

Henry, Henry! Thank goodness. You're here.

HENRY

Is there an emergency?

HILDY

No, it's only...it's seven o'clock. I...I didn't know if you'd gone home.

HENRY

And here I am.

HILDY

I was afraid you'd abandoned me. I think we're the last ones.

HENRY

In the entire museum?

HILDY

Yes, it's late. I lost track of time and...they've turned out the lights. *(beat)* It's...a little spooky.

HENRY

You're worried about spirits?

HILDY

No! Spirits, please. I'm worried about people.

HENRY

What people?

HILDY

People who shouldn't be here.

HENRY

Vagrants? Drifters?

HILDY

I'm not used to being the last one.

HENRY

I would never abandon you like that.

HILDY

You wouldn't?

HENRY

I just needed to get some air.

HILDY

In here.

HENRY

Yes. I come in here all the time. I find it...soothing. Don't you think they're beautiful?

HILDY

The animal hides?

HENRY

The dioramas. The habitats.

HILDY

I suppose. It seems a bit much, really. It's one thing to put up all the trophies county supervisors have collected. That I understand, it's nice to have something on the walls. But all this time, all this money spent on...display.

HENRY

It's educational.

HILDY

I suppose. For the children.

HENRY

I wonder what it must be like.

HILDY

Be like...?

HENRY

To be one of them.

HILDY

A child?

HENRY

No.

HILDY

A...kudu?

HENRY

Funny, yes a kudu would be something, wouldn't it? Tramping around the bush, foraging for food, looking for a mate.

HILDY

You didn't mean a kudu.

HENRY

No.

HILDY

A collector? You're not cut out to be a collector.

HENRY

Excuse me?

HILDY

Henry, I've known you for six years and you are not an outdoorsman. You are not the kind of man to go stalking around the bush. Sleeping in a tent, surrounded by wild animals.

HENRY

It's not so rough, the way these hunters travel? They have whole teams, luxury tents, native trackers...

HILDY

Had. Before the stock market crashed. I don't know if we're going to see expeditions like that again.

HENRY

I suppose not.

HILDY

But it's alright. We have plenty of work with the collection downstairs, you and I. It would be nice, eventually, to go on a dig. But I don't think there's going to be funding for any sort of expeditions coming down the line. We're just lucky to be where we are right now. Cleaning bones...

*Long Pause.*

HENRY

I'm going to ask to be transferred from the bone sorting room.

HILDY

Why? Is there a problem?

HENRY

No, it's -

HILDY

It's a stale smell, the mildew. It's not ideal. But that's why we're cleaning the collection in the first place. That's why we've been given the job.

HENRY

I didn't expect it would take this long.

HILDY

And we aren't just cleaning. We're taking the time to go over each piece, it's remarkable. The bones I've been working with - I think I've put together a new species of eagle! Maybe. And that's just while I'm supposed to be cleaning. Think about all of the history, the knowledge hidden in that room, just waiting for us to unlock it. Think about the discoveries just lying there. It's important work, Henry.

HENRY

Maybe I should be working back at the pits.

HILDY

You can't handle the mildew but you want to breathe in tar?

HENRY

You don't think I'm man enough?

HILDY

I think you're too valuable to the project at hand. You're too valuable to me.

HENRY

I am?

HILDY

I couldn't do it without you.

HENRY

When did you notice I was gone?

HILDY

What do you mean?

HENRY

Did you even notice that I didn't come back from lunch?

HILDY

Of course I noticed.

HENRY

But you didn't try looking for me until just now.

HILDY

I was working! Putting together the eagle. You know how I get when I have a puzzle in front of me? You have to hold all those pieces in your head at once. I got...lost. And then I looked up and it was dark outside. And you weren't there. So I came looking for you.

HENRY

Because you felt, what? Scared?

HILDY

No, well, not at first, not until I realized the museum was closed. I first came to look for you because I was excited! I wanted you to see what I'd put together. I wanted to -

HENRY

To what? To apologize? To explain?

HILDY

To show you.

HENRY

But Hildy, I've been sitting up here all afternoon.

HILDY

You have.

HENRY

Yes. And it's fine. You don't need to explain anything to me. You turned me down, you aren't interested, and I...I'm just...been sitting here, trying to figure out what the next step is going to be for me.

*Henry rises, turning his back to her.*

I'm trying to figure out what my life is going to look like, now. And it's going to take some time, Hildy, but I think there are other options for me, outside of paleontology. Other things I can pursue. Maybe there's a position on the art side of the museum, or at the Otis institute.

HILDY

Wait. What are you going on about, Henry? I'm sorry, I can't -

*Hildy turns him so he looks at her.*

HENRY

I understand that you aren't interested, Hildy.

HILDY

Interested in what?

HENRY

In love.

HILDY

Love?

HENRY

Yes.

HILDY

I'm sorry. You're talking to me about love?

HENRY

Please don't play dumb, Hildy. It doesn't suit you.

HILDY

I'm not trying to -

HENRY

I put you in an awkward position, and that's fine. It's clear to me now that your interests lie elsewhere. Your passion, well, it seems to me that your passion is purely for science. And I actually find that quite admirable. I do! So I won't push it any further. I just need a little time to figure out my next steps. If they don't have a place for me at Otis, perhaps I can work on the displays.

HILDY

But you're a paleontologist, Henry.

HENRY

Exactly! So I really think I could help them. With my knowledge of the collection, of the animals. Think about the renderings I could be doing, of the ice age animals you're discovering? Of your birds?

HILDY

Your paintings are beautiful.

HENRY

Thank you.

HILDY

And then we could still work together.

HENRY

No, no, that's not what I -

HILDY

Because I understand if you want to leave the bone sorting room, if you're saying that you're not in love with paleontology, but I - I do hope we can still work together.

HENRY

You do.

HILDY

Of...of course.

HENRY

But after what I said...

HILDY

What *did* you say?

HENRY

Hildy, please. Don't make me repeat it.

HILDY

I'm not playing a game, Henry. You know that sometimes I don't - my hearing is far from perfect, and sometimes I don't catch everything thing, sometimes I extrapolate -

HENRY

I said. I said: "Would you like to spend your whole life with me?" And you said..."Oh, no thank you -

HILDY

"I've got my own."

HENRY

Yes.

HILDY

Oh, Henry...

HENRY

So in light of that exchange -

HILDY

You've been sitting here all afternoon?

HENRY

I couldn't exactly sit back down there at a table across from you. Watch you just focus in on an eagle skeleton, like nothing else in the world even existed? I'm sorry, I am an understanding man, a compassionate man, but I am not a glutton for punishment. You turned me down and I came up here to regroup, to think, to find Chester. To find Mr. Bryan... to weigh my options.

HILDY

I'm so sorry, Henry.

HENRY

You don't need to be. Please. I put you on the spot, and it wasn't-

HILDY

No, I'm sorry. I just...I didn't -

HENRY

You don't have to say anything more. Of course you have your own life. And it's not fair of me to assume that you would want a husband at all, let alone *me*, so we -

*Hildy kisses him. It's a quick, chaste kiss, but it's enough to stop him from babbling.*

HENRY

What was that?

HILDY

When you said that to me, about your life? You were in the doorway.

HENRY

Yes, I was...standing near the door.

HILDY

And I thought you said "lunch."

HENRY

Lunch?

HILDY

I...your face was in a shadow. The acoustics aren't the best in there, and I...extrapolated.

HENRY

You thought I was asking to spend my whole lunch with you?

HILDY

Yes?

HENRY

But Hildy -

HILDY

I didn't! I had to make an educated guess. And then you left, and I ate my lunch, and went back to working, and then before I knew it I looked up and it was dark, and I was the only one - it seemed I was the only one left in the entire museum.

HENRY

Except me.

HILDY

And it turns out that without you to tell me when to quit, I would probably work all night long.

HENRY

Is that so?

HILDY

I never...I'm sorry, you have to see this from my side. I made an educated guess. I extrapolated based on the evidence.

I could never have imagined that...no, I imagined it, daydreamed about it. But I could never really expect that someone like you -

HENRY

What's someone like me?

HILDY

Someone handsome and charming, and...brilliant and funny. Because let's be honest, I'm a twenty-nine-year-old spinster who spends her days with ancient dead things in the basement of a museum. I'm not exactly marriage material.

HENRY

Don't sell yourself short.

HILDY

And I definitely would have never expected to be proposed to by a man who works with me, who should know that the county doesn't allow employees to co-marry, who should know that if I did agree to marry him, it would mean the end of my career. That I would be expected to resign.

HENRY

Oh.

HILDY

And I wondered. When you didn't come back from lunch?

HENRY

You noticed.

HILDY

And I had the whole afternoon to sit there and think?

HENRY

While you were working on your eagle.

HILDY

I wondered. What if. What if: he didn't say lunch.

HENRY

You heard me.

HILDY

What if. What if he said "life."

HENRY

Yes?

HILDY

Then. What would I...?

HENRY

Yes?

HILDY

And I thought... "I don't want to resign."

HENRY

But I'm not asking you to resign.

HILDY

But you're asking -

HENRY

Your passion, your drive. These are the things that have captivated me. I can't imagine you sitting in a kitchen -

HILDY

A brood of children at my feet?

HENRY

Well, that we can discuss. When the time comes.

HILDY

I'm nearly an old woman, Henry.

HENRY

You have your whole life ahead of you.

HILDY

And if I choose to spend it with you, rather than on my work?

HENRY

You don't have to choose.

HILDY

But it's the law.

HENRY

It's an outdated law.

HILDY

And you want to challenge it?

HENRY

Yes! Yes, I do. If you want to keep working, I will challenge it. We will, and we will win.

HILDY

But I can't...I can't let myself...

HENRY

What?

HILDY

I can't let myself love you. I won't love you. I don't think I can love you -

HENRY

If you have to choose?

HILDY

Yes. I'm sorry, Henry.

HENRY

But you *do* love me?

HILDY

I can't.

HENRY

But do you love me, Hildy? Just answer yes or no.

HILDY

These past few months, working across from you? Watching your hands, as you handle the fossils? I know we'd been friendly in the past, but watching your hands every day, all I can think is "Those are the hands of a gentle man. A thoughtful man..."

HENRY

Not exactly the kind of praise a man -

HILDY

They move so quickly and elegantly, like the whitest doves. And I started thinking - I wonder what his father's hands look like? His grandfather's? What kind of lineage must a man have to acquire such quick and gentle hands?

HENRY

So I'm another evolutionary puzzle to you?

HILDY

No.

HENRY

No, what? No, you don't love me?

HILDY

No, you aren't a puzzle. But this situation is a puzzle. It's a quandry, Henry. I can't spend my life with you, without giving up all my dreams and I must spend my life with you, or I'll give up my dreams!

HENRY

But if that is the only problem, Hildy, there is an easy answer!

HILDY  
What?

HENRY  
*I can resign.*

HILDY  
What?

HENRY  
I'm not passionate about the work, not the way you are. There are other things I can do, there are other things I want to explore. The exhibits, my painting, that's not -

HILDY  
That's not just an excuse to get away from me?

HENRY  
It started that way. But once I allowed myself to start dreaming...it's a good fit, isn't it? It makes sense, with my background in science and my interest in art -

HILDY  
Yes, it makes sense.

HENRY  
See?

HILDY  
But if you come work up here in exhibits, you're still in the museum, you're still a county employee. That's not going to change -

HENRY  
I realize that.

HILDY  
And it's not a great time to quit your job, Henry. Who knows what's going to come of all these crashing markets...if we got married and you had to resign -

HENRY  
You wouldn't support me?

HILDY  
We can't both live on my salary.

HENRY  
Most families live on one salary. If I can't find another job, I'll stay at home, wear the apron, raise the children. I'm very good at keeping house.

HILDY

You're not funny.

HENRY

You should see my rooms.

HILDY

This is serious, Henry. I can't marry you, if it means we have to make this choice.

HENRY

Well, I can't stay at the museum if you don't marry me.

HILDY

You can't?

HENRY

No. I came up here to find a new plan, to... reimagine what my life will be like, without you. And the truth is, I can reimagine every other thing about it. I can reimagine the city I live in, the language I speak, the work I do, the way I spend my days...but I can't imagine not loving you. So please. Unless you really don't love me -

HILDY

I don't.

HENRY

You don't?

HILDY

No! I mean, I don't not love you.

HENRY

What?

HILDY

I love you.

HENRY

Then please. Please, let's just try? I want to spend my whole life with you Hildy, and I know that you may already have your own...

HILDY

But it includes you.

HENRY

It does?

HILDY

Yes.

HENRY

Then there's no doubt. We have to try.

*Henry takes Hildy's hand and pulls her into an embrace.*

HILDY

They would be fools to let you go.

HENRY

We'll find out, won't we? How foolish they all are?

*Hildy examines his hands.*

HILDY

Can I...

HENRY

Yes?

HILDY

Can I show you the eagle?

HENRY

Of course.

*They exit the hall, leaving the audience.*