
Chapter 1

Brielle adjusted the shade from the big black umbrella she held overhead, making sure little Gogo didn't get a burn. Gogo's skin was fair, her bright and coppery hair tidied back in a ropy bun and cinched with a gray satin ribbon. The Arizona sun came straight down on them like a hot beam through a magnifying glass, a hundred-and-seven degrees.

In the umbrella's cool's shade, Gogo crouched on hands and knees, digging in the sand of a large wood-edged box. The box was divided in four quadrants by taut lines of yellow or red string tied on little brass hooks screwed into the insides of the sandbox. Gogo cleared each squared-off section of sand seeking archaeological treasure.

The museum's professor monitored Gogo's digging. She said, "Now, you remember the big bird I showed you inside, what's its name?"

Gogo still searched, focused on her task, hands clawing through the hot sand, searching for plastic dinosaur bones. "Total-minus."

"That's really close, Gogola," the professor said. "Tototlmimus."

Unbothered by the correction, smart Gogo, still raking sand, said, “An ornithomimid of the tetropoda clade.”

Oorna, squatted beside Gogo, snickered and shot a look up to Brielle. They both smiled at their charge’s deep knowledge. Only one week after Gogo’s ninth birthday, and the little girl’s smarts were impressing even the professor guiding their private tour today. The young professor smirked under the brim of her white pith helmet, saying, “Very good, Gogola, that’s correct,” then shooting Oorna and Brielle a humorous wowed expression.

Yes, Gogola Xuxut was a smart child. No public school for the daughter of Markov Xuxut, no boarding school even, nor the fanciest of private schools. Gogola’s school lessons were delivered Monday to Friday, nine till four, via two full-time tutors; Oorna taught the sciences, Danika taught the arts. Brielle held the umbrella.

One thing Brielle wondered, when out like this with Gogo, was how much the public knew. Was it common knowledge who the father was of this precocious young redhead? Did this museum professor know who Gogo’s dad was and how much nefarious power the man held? How many parents called and booked one-on-one guided museum tours usually reserved for a phalanx of thirty kids or more?

Here they were at the Arizona Museum of Natural History, and all around them chattered the voices of school groups, harried teachers and chaperones, packs of kids at various ages, and then one lone little girl with two guardians and the full attention of the tour guides. A fleet of yellow school buses parked out front. They’d arrived in a Rolls Royce.

Who did they think this little girl belonged to?

Was the smiling professor in her safari garb shaking in her desert boots about doing or saying the wrong thing to Gogola

Xuxut? The professor seemed awfully exuberant to be worried about aggravating the most powerful crime boss in the American Southwest. It wasn't possible no one knew, Brielle thought now, holding out the umbrella still and watching a group of kids Gogo's age raucously skipping along the walkway just beyond a long hedgerow. There was a dichotomy between girls like Gogo and the young and unburdened children in the school groups. A dichotomy beyond financial situations. It wasn't that Gogo was afforded the finest of care and tutelage, it was the things Gogo *wasn't* afforded that worried Brielle.

The gathering group, next in line to dig in the sandboxes set up on the concrete center of a small sunny amphitheater, bounced and pogoed, getting a look past the hedge at the one little girl who had command of the six sandboxes. Gogo looked up at them all. She waved, but no one waved back.

Oorna guided Gogo's waving hand to return to its task. Gogo returned to digging and at last located the knob end of a Tototlmimus's third metatarsal. Rubber, of course.

The archaeology dig was the last guided event of their day spent at the museum. Brielle texted Milo to let him know they would be out in a minute and to have the car ready.

But coming through the lobby they were faced with a throng of schoolchildren bouncing out of the museum's gift shop. Gogo came face-to-face with the unruly yet oh-so-happy mob. As an expert in anxiety, Brielle detected the shift in Gogo's posture. Gogo was a nine-year-old girl going on twenty. But a very sheltered twenty. Brielle could relate to that. What they shared made them simpatico. It's what made them friends.

Brielle curved her palms over Gogo's collar and held her young charge protectively as kids whooped and hollered around them on either side. More than half of the kids carried stuffed

animals from the gift shop. Gogo spied the children wondrously, then impassively, but with a measure of covetousness. Those looks Gogo would occasionally display creased Brielle's heart.

Gogo turned to chase her gaze after the last of the public school children trotting by, this one holding a two-foot tall Tototlmimus, the ostrich-like bird dinosaur. Brielle patted Gogo's red hair, soothing her. Oorna paused, half-turned, waiting for them to catch up. Milo stood at the ready in the glass vestibule past the foyer, waiting for them.

Gogo looked up to Brielle. "I think I'd like to visit the wash-room before we leave, Miss Bird."

Brielle nodded and smiled, looked to Oorna and told her they'd catch up. Oorna joined Milo by the exit doors.

Brielle led the way into the bathroom and made sure they were alone. Gogo came to her and hugged her waist, pushing her cheek into Brielle's shoulder.

She muttered, "How come I can't have one of those toys?"

Brielle circled a hand on the little girl's narrow back. "You know how your father feels about American toys, Gogo."

"It's not American, it's a dinosaur," Gogo lamented. "There was no America back then and back then it would have been Mexico anyway."

"You're a future lawyer, my little lady," Brielle said. "You never fail to present a solid argument."

"Maybe there are little ones."

"Little ones what?"

"To-tot-ill-my-miss." Gogo was getting used to the word, sounding it out carefully now after messing it up in front of the professor. A small thing which Brielle knew would weigh heavily on the little girl.

"You want to hide it? Hide a stuffed toy from your father?"

Gogo knew that was a bad idea and shook her head no against Brielle's shoulder. Brielle's fingers untied the satiny ribbon

binding Gogo's hair. She stuffed the ribbon in the pocket of her long black skirt. Gogo said nothing.

Brielle swung around her shoulder bag, fished out Gogo's Tilley hat, and plopped it on the little girl's head. Then shoved it down further. When Gogo giggled she shoved it down even further until Gogo's eyes were covered.

"Quit it," Gogo said, chuckling, then waving her hands out in front of her, trying to find her way. Brielle stepped back and let her wander.

"We don't want your eyes getting sunburned, now, do we, Gogo?"

Gogo plucked the hat up and readjusted it, shooting Brielle a comical sidelong look of irritation.

Brielle hugged her one more time. Gogo whispered, "Don't get in trouble, Brielle."

They walked out together to meet up with Milo and Oorna. Milo went outside first, the beefy, shaved-head security man in the black suit eyeballing everyone coming, looking up and around to make sure little Gogo was safe from predators. In the six years Brielle had been the Xuxut nanny there had never been an attempted abduction, but Markov Xuxut still ran drills and made sure his most prized possession was safe and sound every minute of the day. If someone came for Markov's little girl, Brielle would lay her life on the line, fight to the death for her. If she didn't, there would be no life left for her anyway. Markov would punish anyone's failure in protecting his daughter with execution.

They got in the black Rolls Royce Ghost, Milo holding open the suicide doors for them. The buttercream cabin was frigid in contrast to the baking heat outside. They settled into their seats and buckled up. Before Milo got in the front passenger seat,

Oorna noticed Gogo's loose hair, removing her student's sun hat for her.

Oorna said, "Oh no, Gogola, where's your hair tie?"

Gogo touched her hair, finding it loose. "I don't know," Gogo said. "What happened to it?"

"You had it in the washroom, Gogo," Brielle said, unbuckling her seat belt and opening the door.

Yuri, their other guard, turned in the driver's seat to look at them in the back. "It's just a hair tie."

Brielle touched Gogo's head, a protective gesture, and showed Yuri an expression of disdain. "It's Gogo's favorite hair tie," she said.

Milo was half in the Rolls but now stepped out. "I'll get it," he said.

Brielle got out as well, closing the car door behind her. "I'll go," she said to Milo over the Rolls's roof.

Milo pointed a finger into the car saying, "Back in the car, Brielle. I'll get it."

Brielle shook her head, showed him annoyance. "You're going in the women's washroom, are you, Milo?"

Milo rolled his eyes. "All right, go. But hurry, it's a million fucking degrees out here."

Brielle headed across the hot concrete walk and through the glass doors back into the museum. She chanced a glance back once inside, crestfallen to see Milo coming along behind her. *Shoot.*

Milo lingered in the vestibule again, waiting for her. But he was in full sight of the doors to the gift shop. As she passed the gift shop, she shot a look inside to see that they had a small stuffed Tototlmimus. The plan was to buy it and stuff it in her nanny bag. She could keep it in the guesthouse where she lived, and loan it out to Gogo when Gogo needed it.

Instead she went into the women's bathroom, kned open a toilet stall and sat heavily on the throne. She thumped a tight fist

against the side wall, stomach twisting with heart-aching disappointment.

It was just a stuffed toy.

When Brielle was nine, she had a stuffed kangaroo her mother had bought her when they traveled one winter to Australia—where magically, it was summer. Sydney had been a real friend for a lonely girl whose family traveled the world a lot. An only child with no permanent residence really had no friends. Sydney Kangaroo had helped her when times were the darkest.

She kicked out a foot and braced the sole of her glossy black loafer on the stall door right over a heart scratched on the door with the lovebirds' names inscribed within. *Jenny + Justin, '15*. Probably just wishful thinking on Jenny's part, she guessed, thinking Justin was probably Justin Bieber.

She rolled her head around on her neck, feeling the popping in her vertebrae, groaning and wishing she could make Gogo happy.

She shimmied up her ankle length skirt, revealing her black leggings. Around her ankle circled a black band of rubbery plastic that culminated in a bulging knot with a flashing red light. Her ankle monitor. Markov Xuxut's electronic leash.

Six years ago Markov Xuxut purchased Brielle from *Los Maradiagas de Honduras* to be the nanny for his three-year-old daughter. Seven years ago *Los Maradiagas* murdered Brielle's parents. When the vicious cartel men had hauled her out of the crashed Volvo, spattered with her mother's blood, she'd been screaming, Sydney Kangaroo clutched tight to her chest.