

Neanderthals are extinct... aren't they??

PROLOGUE

About 120,000 years ago, the hominid known as *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* freely roamed the great continent of Eurasia. They survived and adapted to one of Earth's great Ice Ages, fashioned a diversified and complex inventory of flaked, stone tools called the Mousterian industry, and thoroughly mastered the art of making fire. Neanderthals were a hearty people, as evidenced by their massive muscles, and thick, robust bones. They also were intelligent, with a cranium size as large or larger than the newcomers to the evolutionary scene, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. But despite these attributes, the fossil record for *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* abruptly ends about 30,000 years ago.

The great mystery still being debated in anthropological circles is: what happened to Neanderthals? Were they killed off by a change in Earth's temperature? Were they wiped out due to genocide? Illness or disease? Were they replaced by the more aggressive *Homo sapiens sapiens* who migrated to their lands 40,000 years ago?

Both groups co-existed for 10,000 years. Perhaps they lived together in peace, or maybe they often engaged in war--no one knows. The only fact known for certain is that Neanderthals disappeared from the face of the planet about 30,000 years ago, leaving us with this question: what or who caused their sudden extinction?

Or perhaps a better question to ask is, where are Neanderthals today?

CHAPTER ONE

She was fine, dammit. *Fine*. As fine as anyone could be after miscarrying in her second month and losing her beloved fiancé.

Stomping over to the large living room window in her brother Davis's apartment, Vivianne Quinn savagely swept aside the sheer curtains to look down at the cul-de-sac below. Or dead-end street, as the neighbors phrased it. At nine-thirty on a Tuesday morning, it contained no signs of life: the patter of little feet heading for school had already passed by and the parade of adults destined for their respective jobs had long since marched away. A lull in the day's activities now reigned, and would continue until lunchtime when stay-at-home moms ventured from behind closed doors to hold their toddlers' hands and wheel their babies down to the park to get some brisk April air.

Babies. Regret for what might have been stabbed her in her long-since-vacant belly. Now she'd never be able to join the mom club. Not with Harleigh as the dad, anyway. And with Harleigh gone, no other man mattered.

She glanced down at the empty street again. She'd only stayed here one week, but she had the routine down pat. That came from observing life, not participating in it. Ever since the accident, she preferred it that way.

Sighing, she released the delicate curtain. Davis' Bronx apartment with all its assorted junk was just a temporary stop until she was well enough to stand on her own two feet, figuratively speaking.

A mind-numbing headache, one of many "souvenirs" from the car crash, began to rumble through her temples so she sat on a garishly flowered two-seater sofa to massage the pain away. As she did, she glanced around. This place certainly would never be featured in a Better Homes and Gardens spread. Of course Davis had only lived here a couple of months, and it looked it. Obviously he was a devotee of thrift shop chic. Pressed board bookshelves held his many anthropology reference books; the high side tables boasted of pea green potbellied lamps; and the computer in the corner--a 500 megahertz model in need of serious upgrading--had so many sticky-notes on it, the viewing screen was the size of a fist.

Her brother's abuse of his computer system made her shudder. Which wasn't odd since she lived and breathed computers. But ignoring that and the mishmash of decorating styles, she had to admit the living room did have a touch of elegance--because of stately double French glass doors leading into the bedroom.

A sound caused her to jump. She paused to isolate the source, but it was just a noise coming from the walls. The old building creaked, just as her own wounded joints ached whenever the weather grew stormy. Another painful souvenir. But creaks, squeaks, and thuds were sounds she'd have to get used to while she stayed here.

Stomach growls interrupted Vivianne's pity party. Although four months had passed since she no longer ate for two, she might as well indulge in a mid-morning snack. She went into the kitchen to forage, but other than milk, eggs, and bread, the refrigerator was bare. Bare, like she was.

She blew out a breath of troubled air. Just what was she doing here, anyway? Why couldn't she get on with her life?

Because you should've died, too, along with Harleigh and the baby. What makes you so special that you're alive and they're not?

Releasing the refrigerator door, she clutched her head and started rocking back and forth. Damn, damn, and double damn. The pain was still so fresh, she could almost smell Harleigh's musky scent and feel the expanding pull of her waistline.

Tears blurred her vision. As always. Dear lord, she was only twenty-three. Did she have a lifetime of sadness ahead of her?

As if in reply, a knock at the front door echoed down the foyer.

Who could it be at this hour of the day? Was someone checking up on her? Friends, no matter how well meaning, always seemed to open mouth, insert foot. *Her* friends, anyway. She glanced in a mirror over the sink to dry her eyes and make sure her parted hair hid the scar on her forehead. Another impatient knock caused her to stiffly sprint down the narrow hallway to the door and look through the peephole. A mass of platinum curls greeted her vision.

Vivianne toyed with the option of not answering, after all she wasn't dressed for company--sweatpants and all. But she relented and cautiously opened the door. "Hello?"

A full-figured woman who obviously wasn't afraid of bleaching her curly mop stared at Vivianne. In the woman's manicured hands was a small plate covered with a paper napkin. Underneath it was something that smelled absolutely delicious. The woman gave Vivianne the once-over. "Who're you?"

Well, that was rather rude. Vivianne straightened her shoulders and put on her formal tone to answer the question with one of her own. "May I help you?"

"I sure hope so. Where's Davis?"

Such a demanding tone. Vivianne lifted her eyebrow. "I'm his sister. May I help you?"

"Oh! That's all right then." A wide smile lifted the woman's plump face. "I'm Fran. Fran Levine, the downstairs neighbor." She craned her neck to look inside the hall. "Is Davis home?"

Vivianne squelched an urge to smile. Another gal smitten with Davis. Her other brother, Donovan, also suffered that fate, which wasn't unusual because they were identical twins. "Davis is away on business."

The response was immediate. "Well, darn." Fran then noticeably brightened. "Can I borrow some milk? I just noticed I'm all out, and I've got to get ready for work." She scrunched up her face as if she were about to beg. "Please? This way the Dumpster can drown his Oreos when he gets home from school."

Vivianne massaged her forehead. Sometimes focusing was still very difficult, and truth be told, she'd just been released from the rehabilitation home. Valley of the Valium, her brothers unkindly called it. "Um, the Dumpster?"

Outside in the corridor, the woman gave a tinkle of a laugh. "The Dumpster is the 'man' of the house. My ten-year-old brother, Joel."

Fran sounded harmless enough so Vivianne invited her in. After all, if Fran was acquainted with Davis.... "Sure, you can have the whole container."

The woman walked into the kitchen as if she knew the way, which was, of course, not unusual since she purportedly lived in the apartment below. "Listen, I ran into Mr. Bambini, Davis's neighbor across the hall. He asked me to give this to you, or rather to Davis. Funny how he does the baking and not Mrs. Bambini." Fran handed over the plate. "Smells yummy, doesn't it?"

Vivianne removed the napkin to find a flaky crust covered square. The filling looked like a blend of rice and cheese.

"It's called a *torta*, Mr. Bambini's specialty. He makes them every week or so. Sure wish I lived on this floor instead of mine." Fran looked at the baked item so longingly, that Vivianne cut it in half to share. The *torta*, however, didn't tempt her at the moment, so she left her portion on the plate.

"Thanks! You're a doll." Fran demolished the slice.

Just as Vivianne was about to open the fridge to hand over the milk, Fran darted off into the living room. Great. Now Vivianne had to deal with a nosy neighbor.

Strange how when a person opened herself up for one thing, something else always followed.

Fran waited until Vivianne joined her. "So, these are Davis's digs, huh? He's never invited me in. What's he working on? He's an anthropologist, right? And he's got a book out. What an exciting life." Then, with eyelashes demurely lowered, she asked, "When will he be home?"

Vivianne fumbled with the strings on her baggy sweatpants, then tightened them, all the while fuming. She shouldn't have opened the door. She shouldn't have made an effort to be pleasant.

But Fran waited expectantly for a reply. Vivianne chose to answer the second question first. "Actually, he's an archaeologist and sometimes college professor. He's on a promotion tour for his book right now."

Davis and his writing partner, Claude Rhine, had collaborated to write a treatise entitled, *Neanderthal's Nemesis*. She hadn't read it yet, but it had gotten great reviews. Actually, she hadn't read much of anything over the last four months. Pain and depression blocked out even the most basic needs.

"I have no idea when Davis'll be back, Fran. And as for what he's working on, he's querying a few magazines to do a series of articles on early man. You know, *Homo habilis*, *Homo erectus*, Neanderthal--"

"Wait a minute, honey. You're way over my head. I haven't a clue what you're talking about. But Neanderthals? What's so interesting about those guys? I'm an office assistant--I work with a whole slew of 'em--college profs, don't you know?" She must've realized her faux pas. "Whoops! So Davis is a prof, too?"

This time Vivianne couldn't squelch her smile. "College professors aren't Neanderthals." Although maybe she could dispute her own statement. Davis, the younger twin by seven and a half minutes, was the epitome of a male chauvinist caveman. Donovan though, had a gentle side which he took pains to keep buried. Which she completely understood. After all, he was a New York cop. And he had been the one to pull her from the car wreckage.

The phone rang. Fran quickly returned to the kitchen, grabbed the quart of milk, then headed for the door to leave, but for some strange reason, Vivianne gestured for her to stay. Maybe it was because the woman's presence kept the tears away. Plus Fran seemed friendly. Perhaps genuinely friendly. For the last few months, the only people Vivianne'd had contact with were medical staffers at the rehabilitation home who always inquired how she was, but didn't give a hoot about the answer. Her friends had their own lives to live. No one cared to babysit a convalescing Ophelia.

The apartment was only wired for one telephone jack, inconveniently placed in

the tiny alcove which also housed the coat closet, just off the foyer. Most likely Davis wasn't home enough to want extensions installed in the other rooms. Plus there was always cell phones.

A draft circulated up her arms and she shivered as she picked up the phone.
"Hello?"

"Give me Quinn."

Speaking of Neanderthals, it sounded as if one was on the phone right now.
"Davis isn't here."

"Hell! I forgot." The caller paused. "Viv? Is that you?"

Sudden recognition lightened her tone. "Claude?" She covered the receiver with her hand, turned to Fran and mouthed, "It's Claude Rhine, Davis's co-author." Then she continued, "It's great to hear your voice. When did you get back from Spain?"

"Listen, I'm pressed for time. I'm presenting at the museum, Natural History, in an hour and a half." He stopped, then the timber of his voice wavered. "Viv, I brought back something big--fabulous. A perfectly preserved Neanderthal skull! And it's much more recent than the latest find dating back 30,000 years. I just know it is! This'll make me famous, all right. Meet me at the museum--eleven o'clock. I'll arrange to have you admitted to my talk."

"But--"

Click. The line went dead.

Vivianne set the phone back in its cradle. Eleven o'clock? She fingered her long, unkempt hair. Should she go? Was she up for the trip? She'd have to hustle to dress, catch the subway--

"What was that all about?" Fran questioned.

After Vivianne explained, Fran shook her head, which sent her platinum curls bouncing. "That guy sounds like a boor, expecting you to drop everything n' all. Well, it's been nice meeting you. I've got to get to work, and you've got a date with a Neanderthal!"

Laughing at her joke, Fran waved good-bye, then left for her apartment below.

Her decision made, Vivianne wasted no time. The trip to the Museum of Natural History would likely take close to an hour. She stripped off her sweatshirt and hurried into the bedroom. As she changed, the neighbor's words replayed in her

mind. But Dr. Claude Rhine wasn't a cloddish primitive. In fact, she'd known him for such a long time, he was almost like another older brother. Goodness knew he treated her like a kid, just like her brothers. Perhaps that was why she was first attracted to Harleigh. He always considered her a responsible adult. He even liked to be mothered from time to time.

Claude was on his way to becoming one of the leading paleontologists in the country, and he always took great pains to let everyone know that. Although her accident had temporarily waylaid her career as an information systems technician, she still shared his interest in prehistoric fossils. Her whole family did, in varying degrees. Maybe it was in the genes.

A twinge of pain flared through her temple. Damn, damn, and double damn. Along with the ache, incomprehensible voices rasped around in her head. It was almost as if she had a static-filled radio station rattling behind her eyes. Then a flash of brilliant, blinding white burned her retinas. Unfortunately, these sensations were nothing new. Ever since the accident, she'd been plagued with them. Medical science hadn't helped. Evidently, nothing was wrong with her: it was all in her mind.

Yeah, right. She was about as logical and down-to-earth as anyone could get. Gritting her teeth and blinking her eyes, she willed the throbbing and the glare to go away.

Vivianne wiggled into her just-above-the-knees suit skirt, and concentrated on a more pleasant topic. Claude's invitation gave her an excuse to get out of the apartment. Seeing the skull he excavated would also give her an inside scoop on what was bound to be a hugely important anthropological find.

Who would have dreamed that today, she'd have a chance to "meet" an actual Neanderthal?



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