

Chapter 1

Jade tapped on the dive light strapped to her forehead. The beam flickered again, and then shone at full strength. *Shoddy university equipment.* Drifting back to the wall, careful not to disturb the fine layer of silt that coated the floor of the subterranean cavern, she again ran her fingers across the striations in the rock. They were definitely man-made. Much too regular to be natural, and this part of the wall appeared smooth and level underneath the coating of plant life and debris that had accumulated over a half-millennia. She scrubbed her gloved fingertips harder against the rock, instinctively turning her head away from the cloud of matter that engulfed her.

Turning again to inspect the spot she had cleared, she waited with heart-pounding anticipation for the sluggish, almost non-existent current to clear her line of sight. With painstaking slowness, the haze cleared away, and her eyes widened. It was a joint, where precisely-hewn stones fitted neatly together. She could see the vertical lines where the blocks met end-to-end. She scrubbed away another patch, revealing more worked stone.

Raising her head, she let her eyes follow the beam of light as it climbed the wall. About six feet above her head, the regular pattern of the ancient stones gave way to a rough jumble of broken rock and tangled roots. It was a collapsed well, just as she had believed she would find. Remarkably, the web of thick roots created a ceiling of sorts, preserving this bottom section almost intact. She made a circuit around the base, inspecting the rocks. They appeared to be solid, with no apparent danger of further collapse. Nonetheless, she grew increasingly aware of the mass of stone directly above her. It had obviously been in place for hundreds of years, but the thought of loose stone

filling the shaft of a well made her feel distinctly vulnerable.

She checked her dive watch and was disappointed to see that she had exhausted her allotted time. She had carefully planned her exploration so that she would have time to return, plus two minutes, giving her as much time as possible to seek out the well.

Reorienting herself toward the upstream channel, she kicked out and felt resistance, like something tugging at her from behind. Cautiously she again tried to swim forward, and again she felt something pull her back. She was an experienced diver, and knew that she needed to move slowly and remain calm. A sudden movement could tangle her further, or worse, tear a hose loose. She turned her head back and forth, seeking out the obstruction, but to no avail. Whatever she had snagged was directly behind her. Reaching back, she felt for the obstruction but found nothing. A moment's irrational fear rose up inside of her, but she quelled it almost immediately. She had to approach this rationally.

Reaching behind her head she ran her hands along the surface of her breathing apparatus, and soon found the obstruction. A root was wedged between her twin tanks. What were the odds? She tried moving backward, then from side-to-side, but to no avail. She freed her dive knife and tried to saw at the obstruction, but it proved ineffective against the gnarled root. Besides, it was nigh impossible to accomplish anything while working blindly behind her back. She would have to unstrap her tanks and free them from the obstruction. The thought frightened her a little, but she had practiced the maneuver as part of her training. She again looked at her watch, and realized she was now well past time to be done.

Her heart thundered and her pulse surged. *Stay calm, Jade*, she reminded herself. Panic led to unnecessarily heavy breathing, which led to faster oxygen consumption which led to... *Stop it!* None of it mattered right now. She would work the tank free, and then she would make up the lost

time on the return swim. Yes, that would work.

Taking two calming breaths, she methodically unbuckled the straps holding her tanks, and slipped free. With a last breath of sweet air, she took her mouth from the mouthpiece. Holding her breath and keeping a firm grip on the tanks, she turned about in the tight space. A few deft tugs and it was free. Putting the gear back on was awkward in the dark, confined space, but she managed nicely, and was soon breathing the blessed air again. No time to pat herself on the back, though.

She set out at a rapid clip up the dark, narrow channel, swimming against the current, and what had seemed like a lethargic flow of water now seemed to be putting up serious resistance. Particles of silt and bits of vegetation flew past her face as she shot recklessly up the channel. She passed through a twisting section a little too carelessly and scraped her shoulder against the edge. She felt her neoprene suit tear, but under the present circumstances that was no great concern.

She wondered if Saul knew something was amiss. Did he even know how long she had been gone, or when she should have returned? Probably not. He was not a diver. *Great. No one to send in the posse. When I get out of here, I'm finding a dive partner.*

The ceiling was low at this point, and her tank banged against a low-hanging rock. She kept going, certain that the distance had not been so great on the way in. *What if I've missed the way out? What if I've gone too far?* Panic again threatened to seize control, but she forced it down. She remembered this low spot: it was about the halfway mark. Halfway! Down to the dregs of her tank, and she was only halfway.

Her legs pumped like pistons, her cupped hands pulled at the water as if she were dragging herself through sand. She tried holding her breath for longer periods, but soon gave up on the idea. Her body needed the oxygen that was no longer there. Her muscles burned, and the rushing of

blood in her veins was now an audible roar. She tasted copper in her mouth, and her lungs strained against invisible bonds. Shadows appeared around the perimeter of her vision, and slowly crept inward. She was going to die.

Still biting down on her mouthpiece, she screamed in mute frustration. She tried to fight, but her desperate flailing and kicking quickly subsided as darkness consumed her. She released her bite on her useless air supply, and surrendered. As consciousness faded, she saw a light coming toward her.

What do you know? All the stories are true. She watched with detached awareness as the light grew brighter. She was drifting up to heaven... or wherever. The glare grew intensely bright, and then she could have sworn she felt arms around her. *An angel has come to take me to heaven...* A sudden tightness encircled her middle, pinning her arms to her sides, and before she knew what was happening, something was forced into her mouth. She tried to protest, and cool, sweet air poured into her lungs. A coughing fit immediately ensued. She had taken more than a bit of water into her mouth, and now it felt like all of it was in her lungs. She tried to twist free, but whatever it was held her tight.

Instinct took over, and she gradually regained control of her lungs, and spat the water free. With the fresh flow of oxygen came a renewed sense of calm and awareness. Someone had come to her rescue after all. He was holding her tight so that she would not, in her panic, drown both of them. She took few long, calming breaths from the pony tank her rescuer was holding in his right hand. At least, she hoped those thickly muscled forearms belonged to a *he*. Making a point to keep her body as relaxed as possible, she slipped her right arm down, and tapped him twice on the thigh. His grip relaxed a touch, and she raised her hand and she circled her thumb and forefinger to make the "OK" sign. He slid the mini-tank into her hand, and let go of her.

Turning to face her rescuer, she saw that it was indeed a *he*, but other than his blond hair, she could not tell anything about him. Giving him a nod and a quick wave of

thanks, she led the way back up the channel. She could not believe how close she had come to dying. What's more, she could not believe someone had rescued her.

Relief gave way to embarrassment and anger as she neared safety. She couldn't believe how her own bad judgment had almost killed her. *Stupid!* She was a professional, not some weekend scuba diver. This guy, whoever he was, probably thought she was one of the dozen grad school bimbos working the dig aboveground. She was going to beat herself up over this for a long time.

The glow of sunlight flickered in the distance, and soon she was up the shaft, and breaking the surface. Strong hands grabbed her under the arms and lifted her free of the water. Her feet touched ground, and then she dropped down hard on her backside.

"Why were you down for so long?" Saul rounded on her, his square face marred by concern. "What happened in there? Are you trying to kill yourself?" He shook a big, meaty fist in her face. "Because you nearly killed me from worry. Do I need to take up diving so I can keep an eye on you?"

"I'm fine, Saul. Really I am." She shrugged off her tanks and grinned, reaching up to pat his short, neatly coiffed brown hair like she would a faithful pet. "Thank you for sending someone for me. I was wondering if you had even noticed." She didn't catch his reply because her attention was focused on her rescuer, who was clambering out of the water.

He wasn't the tallest fellow, not quite six feet, even with the spiky blond hair, which was already sticking up as it dried in the hot Argentinean sun. He pulled off his dive mask to reveal a lightly tanned face, a friendly smile, and intense blue-gray eyes. Jade smiled back, taking a moment to admire the thickly muscled legs. The guy wasn't the type she usually went for, but he was definitely cute. He took a step toward her, and she hauled herself to her feet to greet him, but Saul was quicker.

“Thank you again for helping us.” Saul stepped between them, clasping the man’s hand in both of his. “She had been down for so long, and I always tell her she takes too many unnecessary risks. Thinks she’s immortal, she does.” He suddenly seemed to realize that he was still shaking hands with the fellow, and let go.

“It’s quite all right.”

She liked his voice. It was cheerful yet firm, and had a rich timbre, like one of those guys who reads audio books. What was she thinking about? She hadn’t even spoken to the guy and already she was mentally babbling.

“I’m just glad I was nearby. It was a close thing getting her out of there.”

Saul was about to say more, but Jade pushed him to the side and offered her hand.

“Thank you so much for your help, Mister...”

“Maddock,” he replied, looking her directly in the eye. “Dane Maddock. And you’re welcome.”

“I’m just so embarrassed that I let myself run out of air like that. I’m really an experienced diver. I just pushed it a little too far.” She stopped, realizing she was on the verge of babbling for real. He was still looking her in the eye, though, which scored him a few points in her book. Most guys would have let their gaze drift a little lower by now.

“You know what they say,” he replied, wagging his finger like a grade school teacher. “One third of your air going in, one third going back out...” He was grinning ear-to-ear.

“...and one third in reserve in case of an emergency, one of which I did arise. I’m well aware of the rule of thirds, Mr. Maddock. I just...” she felt her face grow warm. “I just didn’t follow them this time.” She wanted to be annoyed at his condescension, but his grin told her he was only joking.

“Understood.” He folded his hands across his chest. There went the eyes. Just for a second, but he was definitely checking her out. *Typical guy*. “I would tell you to call me Dane, but I still don’t even know your name.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” What was it about him that made her feel like a complete idiot? She was a professional. “I’m Jade Ihara.”

“A beautiful name.” He sounded like he even meant it. “You don’t have a Japanese accent.”

“My father was Japanese,” she said. “My mother is Hawaiian. I was raised on Oahu.”

“Well, that explains it.” He cupped his chin and looked thoughtfully into her eyes. “I was trying to figure it out, but I couldn’t place it.”

“Explains what, may I ask?” She resisted the urge to squirm like a schoolgirl under his cool gaze.

“You have the traditional Japanese beauty, with just a touch of the robust splendor of Polynesia. Japanese women tend to be a little too skinny. They look peaked. You, on the other hand are quite stunning.”

“I don’t know whether to be flattered or totally creeped out.” He had her laughing—another point in his favor. “Where did you get that line about ‘robust splendor of Polynesia’ anyway?”

“From a coffee commercial,” he said, hanging his head in mock shame. “Forgive me?”

Saul cleared his throat loudly, reminding them of his presence. He stood with hands on hips, tapping his foot. His mouth was twisted in a sour frown. Jade sometimes found his jealousy amusing, but this was not one of those times.

“Saul, if you will please pack up my equipment, I’ll be with you in a moment.” She cut off his protest with a raised hand. “Thank you, Saul. I’ll join you shortly.” She met his stare with a level gaze until he turned away, muttering something under his breath. He snatched up her dive gear and stamped off through the tangled growth. “I’m sorry,” she said, turning back to Dane. “Saul is very protective of me. He means well.”

“Not your boyfriend then?” Dane’s grin was wolfish. He already knew the answer. “Lucky for me, then.”

“No, he’s definitely not my boyfriend. He’s my assistant.” That was technically true, she supposed. “And how do you figure that’s lucky for you?” She couldn’t wait to hear his reply. The guy must really like himself.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you about the old Hawaiian tradition? When someone saves your life, you have to have dinner on his boat that evening.” He made a show of checking the time on his dive watch. “At exactly 18:00 hours. Give or take a few minutes, of course.”

“Is that so?” She really didn’t have time to socialize with this, or any guy. But he *had* saved her life. Besides, an idea was forming in the back of her mind. “This Hawaiian tradition my mother forgot, it doesn’t come with any other expectations, does it?”

“I guess it could,” Dane replied, his teasing smile replaced with a look of pure innocence. “I’m open to suggestion. What, exactly do you have in mind?”

Jade shook her head and waved a hand at him in exasperation. “You’re incorrigible.” She couldn’t believe she was doing this. “Six o’clock it is. I’ll need directions to this boat of yours.” What was she getting herself into? “And Dane? Dinner had better be spectacular.”

Chapter 2

Man, I cannot believe you're kicking us out," Matt Barnaby, Dane's engineer and first mate for this expedition, complained as he swung his leg over the side of their boat, the *Sea Foam*. "And for a girl of all things." He shook his head, turned, and hopped into the waiting motorboat. "Unbelievable."

"Hey, it's not that unbelievable," Dane protested. Actually, it was. Since the death of his wife and unborn son nearly five years ago he had sworn off women. Recent experiences had changed his outlook, and he was beginning to come to grips with some of his inner demons. "I like girls."

"I thought you liked Kaylin." Corey Dean, the ship's computer guru stumbled out of the cabin, trying to slather on sunscreen and spray himself with insect repellent at the same time. His fair skin was no match for the intense sun, but he loved the sea. "I didn't know you were playing the field all of a sudden."

"Kaylin's my friend." Kaylin Maxwell was the daughter of Dane's former commander. The two of them had been through a harrowing adventure together, and come out of it barely alive. The experience had forged a strong bond between them, but sometimes it felt more like brother and sister than anything romantic. Perhaps it was because she was the first woman since Melissa to get close to him. "And she isn't your problem in any case."

"So you won't mind if I ask her out," Matt said, "seeing how you're just friends and all." He smiled a gap-toothed smile, and ran his fingers through his close-cropped receding brown hair, pretending to primp in front of a mirror.

"She's from a Navy family. She'd sooner date a pig

than an army grunt,” Dane jibed.

“See there, Corey? You’ve got a shot after all!” Matt helped Corey over the side and into the small craft.

“You know what really blows?” Corey replied, ignoring Matt’s dig. “Bones goes on vacation, and now Dane turns into the player. I thought we were going to get a temporary break from the college dorm room shenanigans.”

Uriah Bonebrake, nicknamed “Bones”, was Dane’s partner and a longtime companion. They had been best friends since their days in the Navy SEALs. The big Cherokee had a way with the ladies, and was known to kick his crewmates off the boat for an occasional evening of entertaining.

“That’s right,” Dane called back, warming to the banter. “I’m picking up the slack for Bones. Bet you I...”

“You what?” Jade sat astride a jet ski just off the starboard bow. Dane had been so busy bantering with his friends that he had not heard her approach. Her brown eyes sparkled, and her straight white teeth shone against her almond complexion. She was wearing a loose fitting white tank top over a turquoise bikini top. Her black shorts were rolled at the waistband, showing off the firm legs he had tried not to ogle at their first meeting. “Come on now, I’m dying to hear.”

“Epic fail!” Corey laughed and fired up the motorboat. “Good luck climbing out of that hole, Maddock.” He and Matt made mock salutes as they cruised away.

“Bet you,” Dane said, turning back to Jade, “that you absolutely love the dinner I’ve prepared for us.” Leaning over the rail, he offered her a hand, which she clasped firmly. He hauled her over with one tug, and she landed nimbly on the deck, her bare feet making barely a sound when they hit. Martial arts training, he supposed. “By the way, totally unfair shutting down the engine and drifting up on me like that.”

“I’m full of surprises.” She gave him a coy grin. “If

you're good, I might let you take me for a spin around the harbor." She surveyed the *Sea Foam* with an appraising eye. "Nice," she said. "She's obviously been worked hard, but I can tell you take good care of her."

"Done much sailing?" he asked, intrigued by this beautiful young woman who seemed to have a great deal of depth. "I suppose if you've done enough diving, you have to have climbed your share of rigging."

"Is that some sort of innuendo?" she teased. He shook his head and she laughed. "I grew up around the water in Hawaii. My uncle had a fishing boat, and I spent a lot of time out with him. My mother hated it, said it wasn't ladylike, but I didn't care. Even then I loved the sun, the salt spray, the dips and the swells." Her eyes had a faraway glint as she remembered. "I don't get out on the water as much as I used to. Mostly when I go back to visit my mother and uncle."

"What about your father?" Dane asked. He could tell by the way she flinched that he had touched on a sore subject. "Sorry. I don't mean to pry."

"That's all right," she said. "He left before I was born. Went back to Japan. He wasn't really part of my life." She stared down into the blue-green water, her face now downcast. "I did all right, I suppose. What about you? What's your story?"

"Navy brat," Dane said. "Did my time in the service, met my friend Bones, and we went into business together when we left the SEALs." He shrugged. "It's a good life. Lots of sun. The occasional interesting diversion," he gave her a meaningful look and grinned.

"I think you skipped over quite a bit in that lovely ten-second autobiography." She narrowed her eyes and stepped close to him. "But that's okay. I have all night to pump information from you." Raising her head, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. "What's on the grill?"

Dinner was one of Dane's specialties: broiled sea bass

with lime and herbs, steamed vegetables and fresh fruit. Jade was duly impressed, and dinner conversation was relaxed and enjoyable. An archaeologist by trade, she had graduated from the University of Utah with a specialty in Native American tribes of the southwest, and now served on the faculty of Central Utah University.

“So,” Dane said, squeezing a lime into his second Dos Equis, “what is someone with your background doing working an early Spanish dig in Argentina? Seems pretty far out of your area.” He took a long drink, savoring the strong flavor, the cool drink perfect on such a muggy evening.

“It’s not as far afield as you might think,” she said. “The Spaniards who founded this settlement were some of the same men who explored the American southwest, even up into Utah.” She put her bottle down and folded her hands in her lap, suddenly serious. “I have a business proposition for you.”

“Bummer,” Dane said. “And here I hoped it would be a proposition of a more personal nature.” He smiled, put his beer down, and leaned forward, mirroring her posture. It was a technique by which Bones swore. He said it created empathy and identification. Then again, when had Bones ever cared about either of those things? Dane suppressed a laugh and leaned back, letting his arms hang over the sides of the chair.

“Very funny,” she said, misunderstanding the reason behind the grin on his face. “Personal comes after I’ve known someone a great deal longer than one evening. Or did you perhaps think I was, shall we say, promiscuous?”

“Didn’t think, only hoped.” That was a comeback worthy of Bones, but it didn’t gain him any points. Jade just smirked. Bones had a natural way with women, while Dane had to work hard at it. It wasn’t fair. “Seriously, what’s your proposition?”

“I need to have another go at that underground stream.” She raised her voice and hurried on when she saw

Dane grimaced. “I think it will take only one time. I need to go back to the place where you rescued me.” She paused, her brown eyes boring into him. “And I need a dive partner.”

“I hate fresh water dives,” Dane protested. “They’re dangerous, as you found out today, and they’re not something I’m comfortable doing.” Jade kept staring at him in silence. He knew what she was up to, waiting for him to fill the gap in the conversation. She would try to keep him talking until he talked his way through all his objections and right smack into doing what she wanted. Not biting, he retrieved his beer and took another swig.

“I don’t blame you. I know it’s dangerous work, which is why I need an experienced diver with me.” Her voice softened. “This is very important to me. I’ve been working on it for ten years. It’s not...” She broke off, uttered a distinctly unladylike curse, then mumbled something that sounded a lot like “Why do I get so flustered around you?” before turning her attention to her beer.

He made *her* feel flustered? He swore he would never understand women. The look of disappointment on her face was heartbreaking. “Why don’t you tell me what you’re working on?” he said.

“If I tell you, will you dive with me?” She cocked an eye at him.

“No,” he lied, knowing full well that he was going to let her have her way because... well, just because that’s what was going to happen. “But I’ll think about it. Tell me what you’re doing here.”

Jade leaned across the small table, close enough that he could smell her perfume. Jasmine or something like it. “Are you familiar with the story of the Seven Cities of Cibola?”

“I’ve heard the name,” he replied cautiously. “That’s about it.” A creepy *déjà vu* feeling blanketed his mind, enveloping him in a muzzy semi-conscious state. He couldn’t possibly be getting into another weird mystery.

“Part of the impetus behind Spanish exploration of New Spain, what we could term Colonial Mexico, was the myriad of myths about treasure and magical places.” As she spoke, she sat up straighter and her voice gained strength and confidence. She would make a great lecturer. “One of the greatest was the legend of Las Siete Ciudades Doradas De Cíbola, the Seven Golden Cities of Cibola. The myth was an outgrowth of the Moorish conquest of Portugal in the early eighth century. Allegedly, in the year 714, seven Catholic bishops and their followers fled across the Atlantic to a land called Antilia.”

“The Antilles,” he chimed in, to show that he was paying attention.

“Correct. The story goes that they fled to the New World and established the seven cities, where they hid gold, gems and religious articles to keep them safe from the Moors.”

At the mention of religious articles, Dane bolted upright. “Oh no. No friggin’ way!” He struck the table with his fist so hard that both their beers tipped over. Jade managed to catch hers, but his hit the table, spewing its foamy contents everywhere.

“Nice,” Jade deadpanned. “Are you always this erratic? What did I say, anyway?” Her smooth features were tense with concern.

“Nothing,” he muttered. “I just had a bad experience recently and...” What could he tell her that she would actually believe? “It’s not important.” Before she could reply he hurried to the galley to retrieve some paper towels. Returning, he sopped up the mess as Jade looked on with an expression somewhere between amused and offended.

When the spill was cleaned up, she nodded like an officer at inspection time, and inclined her head toward the bow. “How about we move back there and watch the sun set?” Dane liked that idea just fine, but was disappointed when, once they were seated, she resumed her story.

“The Antillean islands failed to produce the great quantities of gold and silver the Spaniards were expecting, so they set their sights on the continent and its purported riches. As soon as Cortes and his men finished conquering the Aztec Empire in the early 1520s, they set out to find these legendary Seven Cities of Gold. The expedition took them as far as the Texas panhandle, but needless to say, they found no sign of Cibola.

“And then, in 1528 a Spaniard named Cabeza de Vaca was shipwrecked on the Texas Gulf Coast. He wandered through Texas in into northern Mexico before his rescue in 1536. He told of fantastic treasures he had seen in villages to the north, “with many people and very big houses.” And thus, what is now New Mexico became targeted as the mythical Cibola.

“Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza soon became intrigued by the fantastic riches rumored to exist in the Seven Golden Cities of Cibola beyond New Spain’s northern frontier. In 1539 he sent an expedition led by Estevanico, a black slave who had been shipwrecked with Cabeza de Vaca, and Fray Marcos de Niza to verify de Vaca’s reports. Estevanico did not return. It is reported that he died in western New Mexico at Háwikuh, one of the Zuñi pueblos.”

“I notice you emphasize ‘reported’ that he died,” Dane observed. “You don’t think so?”

“Be patient, I’m getting to that,” she reproved, smiling. She was warming to her tale, and obviously thought he was as well. And he was, despite his better judgment. “Get yourself another Dos Equis and shut up. Get me one too.”

He produced the drinks in short order, and settled back in to hear the rest of the story.

“Fray Marcos returned to New Spain, declaring he had seen golden cities, the smallest of which was bigger than Mexico City. These strange people were said to possess in great quantities domestic utensils and ornaments made of gold and silver, and to be proficient in many of the arts of

the Europeans.”

“I think I know how this story ends,” Dane said, recalling a bit of history. “Coronado took a stab at it, and failed miserably. Seems like these seven golden cities were just mud villages and such. Nothing but a pipe dream.”

“Right. He spent almost two years searching for the seven cities, but finally concluded that they were a myth. His expedition was branded a failure.” She bit her lip and stared out at the water.

“This Fray Marcos guy, why do you think he lied? Didn’t want to admit to having failed? Maybe he didn’t want his friend to have died in vain?”

Jade turned and met his gaze with wide-eyed seriousness. “The kindest historians think that, from a distance, he saw sunset on adobe walls containing bits of silica, and believed he was looking at glimmers of a city of gold.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Dane protested. “Why would he see a city of gold from a distance, and never go close enough to get a good look? And what about all the details he provided? How would he know those things if he observed from afar?”

“You’re right,” she said. She took a sip of her beer, then rubbed the bottle across her forehead. Dane watched the cool beads of condensation trickle down her tanned skin. Illumined in the setting sun, they put him in the mind of gold. “Marcos did find Cibola, and he concocted his story to protect the truth.” She took another drink, waiting for his reply.

“Come on, now. Don’t leave me hanging,” he said. “You’ve got to fill in the blanks.”

She reached into her small black bag and withdrew a plastic folder, opened the catch, and produced a small stack of paper clipped sheets. “I’ll hit the high points, so I don’t bore you,” she said, smiling mischievously. “Fray Marcos’s journal turned up in a collection in Spain. I’ve scanned the

pertinent pages. Translations are on the back.” She held them out to him.

Dane felt strangely detached as he took them. His fingers were numb and his mind was muddled, and not because of the beer. “Another journal,” he muttered. Jade cocked her head and frowned, but said nothing. “Unbelievable.” He didn’t feel like elaborating.

“Uh huh,” Jade said. “He provides precious few details, but he makes it plain that he found something fantastic. He is also very clear that the story he told Mendoza was not only a fabrication, but a tale carefully crafted to lead them astray.” She took a deep breath and held it, regarding him as if taking his measure. “I don’t know why, but I feel I can trust you.” Dane nodded and waited for her to continue. “The journal indicates that Marcos wanted to hide Cibola from Mendoza, Coronado and the rest, but he didn’t want to hide it from the world forever. I believe he left a clue in the bottom of a well.” She paused, either for effect or to see if he had any response. “I found that well just before you rescued me. The top caved in long ago. No one even knew it was there. The bottom portion is intact.” She leaned back, picked up her drink, and peered at him with an intense stare as she sipped her beer.

Dane made a show of examining the papers, all the while turning things over in his mind. He could tell himself that he didn’t want to get involved in another caper like he had before, but truth was his heart was racing from sheer excitement. He had chosen his particular field not only because he loved the sea, but because he loved the mystery, the search and discovery. This was right up his alley. And then, of course, there was Jade. He glanced up, his eyes meeting with hers long enough to register the crinkled brow and tiny smile. She knew she had him.

“So, what exactly do you want me to do?”

Chapter 3

The water was colder than he remembered, and the tunnel darker. He supposed adrenaline had drawn his thoughts away from such things when he was coming after Jade. Now he had time to examine his surroundings, all of which reminded him how much he hated cave diving. Too many skilled divers had met their ends in caves just like this one. Dark, twisting, precarious arteries of peril, all of them. He couldn't wait to get out of here and get some sleep.

The two of them had stayed up late, planning the dive. By the time they were finished, Matt and Corey had long returned to the ship and called it a night. He had suggested that Jade stay the night, but she laughed and gave him a chaste hug before heading back to shore. Thoughts of her blended with images of gold and treasure until he couldn't say which was the most responsible for keeping him awake.

He snapped out of his reverie when the narrow channel opened into a wide chamber. They were in the well. He looked up, allowing the beam of his headlamp to play across the ceiling. A thick snarl of ancient roots held up massive chunks of stone, bound together by ancient mud and clay that had seeped down into the collapsed well shaft. The whole thing had a precarious feel to it. He couldn't wait to finish up and get out of there. Jade drifted up alongside him, and motioned toward the floor as if to say "get on with it." He needed no convincing.

Reaching into the small dive bag strapped to his waist, he fished out his metal detector. About three times the size of a cell phone, the rectangular instrument with its fat red buttons and large digital display reminded him of the handheld football game he had gotten for his fourteenth birthday. The 'players' were little red dashes, and it emitted an annoying tweet whenever you scored. His parents had

regretted buying it for him by the end of the first day. He grinned at the memory as he punched the buttons and waited for the instrument to boot up. It was still hard to think about Mom and Dad, but it didn't hurt the way it once had.

The screen was black, with green indicator bars up each side. He drifted to the downstream side of the well, chose what passed for a corner, and began his search. The little detector could penetrate about three feet in ideal conditions, and he was banking on the bottom of the well being silt and mud. He hoped that whatever they were looking for was made of metal. If it wasn't... well, it wouldn't be the end of the world if they had to excavate the entire floor, but it was worth giving the unit a shot. Besides, it was an expensive toy, and he wanted to play with it. Better than a power tool any day.

Jade shone a high-powered dive light on the floor in front of him, leading the way as he crisscrossed the well bottom. Thankfully there were few obstructions, the gentle current having kept the floor swept clean over the centuries. He held the detector a half-meter off the bottom, sweeping it slowly back-and-forth, feeling like a detective opening a case.

The first hit came almost immediately, small and faint. He stopped and swept the area again. He felt certain that it wouldn't amount to anything, but he indicated the location to Jade, who swam over to meet him. She produced a long, thin digging tool and probed the area, careful not to stir up more dirt than necessary. The steady flow of the underground stream should keep the silt down, but it did not hurt to take care. In short order, she dug free a small, dark object about the breadth of his thumbnail. Perhaps a button or a coin, but they wouldn't know until they took it up top and cleaned it. Jade shrugged and deposited the item in her own dive bag.

The search continued with few results. They turned up a couple more unremarkable chunks of some metal or

other, but nothing more. Dane found himself growing impatient when suddenly his screen went supernova. The indicators on either side shot up, the bars hovering near the top. The display was a solid green square. He moved it back and forth over the spot, which was almost in the very center, trying to get a feel for the size of the object. He quickly determined that it was no larger than a meter square, and no smaller than half that size. He switched the detector off and put it away. He would finish his sweep after they had exhumed whatever this was, but he had a good feeling that this was what they were looking for.

He withdrew his digging tool, a ten-inch titanium rod with a blunted, triangular tip and a six inch rubber grip on the other end, and drew an imaginary circle around the target area. Jade nodded and began working on one side while he took the other. Firmly, but with great care, he probed the perimeter of the target area. Given the intensity of the signal, he hoped it was not buried too deep. The well bottom, mostly silt and clay, gave way easily as he pushed the rod in up to the handle again and again until finally he met with resistance. A glance told him that it was about seven inches down. He withdrew the tool and tried a spot six inches closer to the area where Jade was working. Again he struck something solid at a depth of seven inches. He tapped Jade on the shoulder, and indicated the area, giving her a thumbs-up, which she returned with enthusiasm. Together, they began removing a half-millennium of dirt, clay and rock. A cloud of fine particles enveloped them, but the lazy current carried it away, though not quite fast enough to keep pace with their digging.

When they had cleared a hand's-width channel about two feet in length, he was finally able to see what they were excavating. It was smooth and dark with a smooth angled edge. The exposed surface was slightly convex. Encouraged, Dane produced a larger digging tool, a small shovel with a wide blade that Bones liked to call his "beach toy", and began scooping away the soil in large chunks. Jade tapped

her wrist, and he consulted his dive watch. They had been down longer than he had thought. They had five minutes to get this thing out of the ground and start their return with a reasonable amount of time to spare. After Jade's near-disaster, he wasn't willing to take chances. They each carried a pony tank, but he would prefer to avoid using them altogether.

They worked fast, and soon had all but a thin layer of dirt and clay cleared from what he no longer thought of as an object, but an artifact. He swept the dirt away until his gloved fingertips touched the surface. It was hard and smooth with regular raised bumps and lines. His fingers searched for the edge, and found it, squared off and a half-inch thick. Increasingly confident in the solidity and durability of the artifact, he worked the edge of his shovel around the sides, clearing away the debris, while Jade brushed the surface clean.

When the object was fully exposed, they paused, letting the silt drift away. As the water cleared, the object seemed to rise up toward them. It was a breastplate, though its thickness and apparent weight made it obvious to Dane that no man had ever worn it. Time and the elements had turned it almost black, but in the glow of the dive lamps he could discern raised markings. His heart pounded with eager anticipation as the two of them grasped it by opposite edges and pulled.

Nothing.

They tried again, but it would not budge. He checked his dive watch and found that they had less than two minutes. Retrieving his small digging tool, he worked it under one edge, and tried to pry it up, but to no effect. Jade did the same on her side. He reminded himself that, if need be, they could come back with better tools and fresh tanks. After five hundred years, the thing wasn't going anywhere soon, but he was stubborn enough to not want to leave it for even a short while. He managed to get the titanium blade underneath the breastplate, and levered it back and

forth, working it along the edge. Soon he had enough leverage to try and pry it up from the bottom. Hoping that it was as sturdy as he reckoned, he braced his flippered feet on the floor and lifted. The breastplate budged a millimeter, then two, and then it broke free with a massive upsurge of dirt and clay.

Knowing they were on borrowed time, Dane motioned for Jade to help him with the breastplate, which was sitting on its edge on the well floor. She held up her open hand, telling him to wait. Opening her mesh bag, she pulled out two sturdy straps and secured them around the breastplate. Where they crossed in the middle, she hooked a quick-connect, then snapped that onto a thick, folded object. He tilted his head questioningly, but she was working too fast to notice. She unsnapped her pony tank from her belt, and secured it to a valve. Dane watched in admiration as the object grew. It was a torpedo-shaped bladder with two handles on the top. That would definitely help with the lifting. He took hold of the bladder, and was pleased to find that the added buoyancy made it an easy burden. He was about to lead the way out when Jade pointed at his feet.

He looked down to where they had pulled up the breastplate. The silt had drifted away to reveal a dark circle embedded in the floor. A sigil, a cross inside a clover, was engraved in it. Jade dove down and began trying to work it free.

It looks like a seal, Dane thought. A cold certainty swept over him, and he shook his head. He wanted to shout, for all the good it would do. He watched as if in slow motion as Jade gave a twist, and the edge of the seal crumbled. Cracks appeared in the surface, and then it imploded. Knowing she had screwed up big-time, Jade turned and headed for tunnel leading out, with Dane right behind her. Giant bubbles burst forth and then a muffled sucking sound filled the watery cavern. The gentle current was now a daunting foe, and he struggled to make headway, the breastplate dragging him down.

A chunk of rock bounced off his mask, knocking it askew and letting a in a small trickle of water. The ceiling was coming down! Invisible hands pulled at him, seeking to draw him back into the well. He was in the shaft, but he was making little progress. His legs burned, and his aching lungs reminded him that air would soon be in short supply. Letting go of the breastplate with his right hand, he grabbed for the side of the tunnel, searching for a handhold. His legs still doing double-time, his fingertips found a crack in the rock and he pulled himself forward. He hoped Jade had made it out.

He suddenly felt himself being hauled forward, and he was dimly aware of a gloved hand clutching his shoulder. He kicked and paddled as Jade pulled him into a recessed area on the side of the tunnel. Thick vertical cracks ran down the wall. Still fighting the current, he shoved his free hand into one, made a fist and twisted until it was wedged tightly. Jade had done the same, and she wrapped her free arm around both him and the breastplate, helping him hold on.

The current raged, and Dane's legs were slowly pulled out from under him. He kicked furiously as he felt himself drawn inexorably toward the well and certain death. Jade still clutched him tightly, and he was glad to know she was still holding on as well. His shoulder screamed in agony, and he feared it would pop out of its socket, but he tensed his muscles and held on. Dirt and debris battered them as it was sucked down the tunnel and into the well.

And then his hand slipped.

It happened suddenly. One moment his fist was painfully wedged in the rock, the next instant he was pulled free, taking Jade with him.

A tremendous crash sounded in the darkness behind them, loud in the watery tunnel, and then they were hurled back up the channel, away from the well. He careened into one wall, then another. He tumbled forward, the breastplate banging painfully against his shin. He was flipped upside

down, and he crashed into a wall of stone, his breath leaving him along with his mouthpiece, and he slid to the bottom amidst a shower of dirt and rock.

Woozy, he tried to get a handle on his wits. He found his mouthpiece, forced it between his teeth, and tried to breathe, but his lungs were constricted from the blow. Schooling himself to calmness, he relaxed. It was no easy task to will himself to be at ease underwater in the dark, but soon he was able to take a sip of air. A few more tentative gasps and he was breathing again. He did not need to look at his dive watch to know he would soon need his reserve tank. He felt for it at his hip, and was not completely surprised to find it gone.

Righting himself, he tried to get his bearings. The well must have finally collapsed, re-sealing the hole Jade had opened, and sending the wave of water that had sent them shooting back up the tunnel. That was good. It meant that he was closer to the way out. But how to find his way in the dark?

He ran his hand along the wall, and realized that he had struck a sharp curve in the channel. Trailing a hand along the edge, he swam forward, hoping he was headed in the right direction. Several times he collided with obstacles, or banged into the opposite wall in particularly narrow stretches of the tunnel, but he kept moving forward. The darkness was absolute. *If I hit the collapsed well, I'm dead. I'll never make it back from there.* The thought did not strike him with fear so much as it disappointed him. He wasn't ready to go. *Where is Bones when I need him?*

A faint glimmer appeared far ahead of him, and then a bar of yellow light sliced through the dirty water. Jade was somewhere up ahead. He swam furiously, the light shining brighter as he the intervening space grew smaller. Before he knew it, Jade was with him. She took hold of the breastplate and together they swam out of the murky tunnel.

Dane spat out his mouthpiece as he broke the surface, and sucked in a lungful of hot, humid air. Matt and Corey

were waiting for them, along with Saul. The three of them lifted the breastplate from the water, and then hauled the two divers out.

Dropping to one knee, he removed his mask and turned to look at Jade, who lay on her side, breathing hard.

“I don’t know about you,” she panted, “but I’m thinking we shouldn’t go back down there anymore.”

“Do you think?” Dane said, grinning despite the dozen or so pains he felt throughout his body. “Do me a favor. If we ever dive together again, check with me before you pry anything out of the floor.” Still panting, he took a few deep, calming breaths. “I just hope that whatever we found was worth it.”

“It will be,” she said. “Did you see the symbol on the seal?” Dane nodded, remembering the clover around the cross. “That was the mark of Fray Marcos de Niza.

Chapter 4

“**Dude**, this place is seriously dry. Somebody turn on the humidifier.” Bones unscrewed the top of his bottled water, chugged half of it, and dumped the rest on top of his head. He let loose with a massive belch, and tossed the empty bottle into the back of Isaiah’s pickup. “You didn’t tell me it would be like this, Cuz.”

Isaiah frowned. “You realize this is a desert. What did you expect?” He hitched the backpack over his shoulder and leaned in through the driver’s side window to grab his clipboard and notebook. Straightening, he fixed Bones with a level gaze. “Bones, this is a serious dig, and the first one I’ve ever directed. Promise me you won’t be...” He paused, searching for the words.

“Be myself?” Bones asked. He had to laugh when his cousin nodded in affirmation. “All right Cuz, I’ll behave. Honest injun!” He raised his hand like a plains warrior.

Isaiah rolled his eyes. “Bones, you know I hate it when you talk like that. It degrades our people.” He shook his head. Likely, he knew Bones well enough to know his sense of humor would never change. “Forget it. Grab that other bag.” He nodded to a black duffel bag in the bed near the wheel well on Bones’ side of the truck.

“Are you sure we’re related?” Bones kidded, hefting the bag. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe we’re swimming in the same gene pool, know what I mean?”

“Our mothers were related. I don’t claim you at all, *Cuz*.” Isaiah grinned and winked. “Let’s get going. I don’t want to be late on my first day.” He led the way down a dusty gravel drive past a line of dusty trucks and SUVs that Bones assumed belonged to the workers on the dig. Falling a few steps behind his cousin, Bones licked his finger and wrote “YOUR MOM IS THIS DIRTY” on the back of a

Range Rover before picking up the pace to catch up.

“You know you love having me around,” he said, clapping a hand on the smaller man’s shoulder. “By the way. Think you could explain to me how my Tonto act disgraces our ancestors, but it’s all right for you to dig up their bones?”

“We’re not exhuming any graves,” Isaiah said. His long, thin face visibly pained. “We’re examining pictographs, and excavating artifacts from the site

“Oh,” Bones said, shrugging. “I thought it was because these guys are Fremont and we’re Cherokee.”

Isaiah snapped his head around and raised a finger, looking every bit the junior college professor that he was. His lecture was thankfully cut off by an attractive young woman in a business suit.

“Excuse me. Are you Dr. Horsely?” she asked, though her tone indicated that the question was a mere formality. She knew exactly who Isaiah was.

Bones chuckled, drawing annoyed glances from her and Isaiah. His cousin’s family name was Horse Fly, but Isaiah had legally changed it when he went to college.

“Yes, I’m Isaiah Horsely. How may I help you?” Isaiah took the woman’s proffered hand, looking distinctly uncomfortable. He had always been shy around women.

“I’m Amanda Shores of the Deseret Bugle. I’d like to ask you a few questions about the dig.” Not waiting for Isaiah’s reply, she thrust a digital recorder in his face and pushed the record button. “What do you expect to find in this site?”

“I can’t say yet,” Isaiah said, taking a step back. “This site’s very existence is a new revelation, and we’ve made only a preliminary survey. There are quite a few fascinating pictographs...”

Amanda cut him off. “Why do you think Mr. Orley has kept this site a secret for so long?” She took a step toward him, keeping the recorder in his face. “What do you think he has to hide?”

“He kept the site a secret in order to protect it.” Isaiah looked decidedly uncomfortable. “I have no reason to believe he is hiding anything.”

“We really have to go Miss Shores,” Bones said, taking Isaiah by the arm and guiding him around the reporter.

Amanda was not deterred. She stepped in front of Bones, blocking his path. “And who might you be?” There was challenge in her hazel eyes as she faced him.

“Uriah Bonebrake, but you can call me Bones. I’m just a grunt on this expedition, helping Dr. Horsely with his project. But if you’re going to do a write-up on me, would you mention my band? We’re called ‘Custer’s Next-to-Last Stand’. I’ve got a demo tape...”

“I’m sorry, that’s not my department,” Amanda said, cutting off the recorder and tucking it into her purse. She pointedly turned her back on Bones as she turned back to Isaiah, proffering a business card. “Here’s my card, Dr. Horsely. If you find anything of interest, I would appreciate a call.” She said it as if it was an order rather than a request.

Isaiah nodded and tucked the card into his pocket. Together he and Bones made their way toward the dig site.

“You gonna’ call her?” Bones asked, stealing a glance over his shoulder as Amanda climbed into her car. “She’s pretty cute in a brunette gymnast sort of way.”

“You’re crazy, Bones. I don’t know how you lived this long.” Isaiah chuckled and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “And yes, I just might call her.”

They walked in silence for a short while. Bones took in the high skies and rugged terrain. It was beautiful, but a bit confined for someone accustomed to the sea. He tried to imagine being a native tribesman a thousand years ago, fighting to survive in this desolate land. Isaiah had assured him that despite appearances, Utah was far from barren. In fact, the land was teeming with life if you only knew where to look for it. Bones supposed that made it like the ocean in a way: bleak on the surface, but abundant life concealed within its depths.

They had not walked far when a short, square man in a weathered John Deere hat hailed them. He wore a flannel shirt in spite of the heat, and sweat rolled down his florid face. He drew a pack of Beech Nut from the back pocket of his jeans and packed a wad into his cheek before speaking.

“You gonna’ keep them diggers over at the site where they belong?” He looked at Isaiah as if daring him to say ‘no’. “I don’t want ‘em nowhere else. This is a working ranch, and I ain’t got time to be chasin’ college kids all over the place.”

“We’re fully aware of the parameters of the dig site,” Isaiah said. “Mr. Orley, I’d like you to meet my cousin, Uriah Bonebrake. People call him Bones.”

Bones reached out to shake the rancher’s hand, but the fellow just stared up at him for a long moment. He spat a small stream of tobacco juice onto the dusty gravel. “You’re one big damned Indian. I think you’re the biggest ‘un I’ve ever seen.”

“I used to model for the cigar store Indians,” Bones said, “but chewing tobacco put us out of business. Now I just go around making white people hurt their necks.”

Orley frowned and pursed his lips, glaring at Bones. He looked like he might spew out a stream of curses, but suddenly he laughed and clasped Bones’ hand. “By God, you’re a funny fellow too. This ‘un here,” he nodded at Isaiah, “you’d sooner get a tater out of a goat’s behind than get a smile out of him.”

Bones shuddered at the bizarre mental image. “He’s a college fellow,” he said in a conspiratorial tone, eyeing Isaiah out of the corner of his eye. “You know the type. Serious all the time.”

“I do know it,” Orley said. “You mean you ain’t a college fellow yourself?”

“Me? Not a chance. Retired from the Navy.” He left out the fact that he had earned a two-year degree while in the service. “You ever in the service, Mr. Orley?”

“Hell yes! Did my tour in ‘Nam and got the hell out of

there.” He nodded at Bones, as if satisfied, and turned back to Isaiah. “Anyways, keep them diggers over there,” he pointed to the dig site just visible in the distance. “And stay out of the small barn,” he indicated a large shed built against a sheer rock wall about a hundred yards to the east of where they stood. “I got a sick bull in there. I don’t know that you’d catch anything, but I don’t need you upsettin’ him. We clear?”

“Absolutely,” Isaiah said, smiling. “And let me thank you again for opening up your ranch for this dig. I admire the way you’ve preserved the site for so many years, and I appreciate the opportunity to be the first to excavate it.”

“Ah, forget it!” Orley waved a calloused hand at him, and spat another brown puddle on the ground. “Ever since that feller at Range Creek opened up his place, I knew it was just going to be a matter of time before you college ‘uns started poking around. Might as well get it done.” He turned away and strode off toward his small house just visible to the southeast.

Bones looked at Isaiah, who grinned and shrugged. “He’s not a bad fellow,” Isaiah said. “I can imagine that after the undisturbed Fremont sites were opened up on Range Creek, he probably did feel like he needed to share his site on his own terms.”

“Whatever,” Bones said. “Let’s head on to the site. I’m anxious to do some digging. Should be fun.”

“This is the most boring thing I have ever done.” Bones scuffed the ground with the toe of his boot. “I had this crazy idea that a ‘dig’ might involve some actual digging.” He snapped another picture of the pictographs adorning the rock face, and let out a dramatic sigh. They had spent what felt like hours photographing and cataloguing the various pictures etched into the rock. The others members of the dig were mapping the lay of the land and making records of the artifacts that lay strewn across the ground. He had been

surprised to see how plentiful they were, and that Orley had apparently left them untouched where they lay.

“Are you sure you’ve been on a dig before, Bones?” Isaiah did not turn to look at him, but instead kept his eyes on the pictographs that held his attention. “You told me you loved archaeology.”

“Yeah, but the last dig I was on, there was climbing and people shooting at me and stuff.” He knew he sounded like a sullen schoolboy, but he didn’t care, because at least it annoyed his cousin. “It was fun!”

“You’re a piece of work, you know that?” Isaiah shook his head. “I swear, sometimes you even have *me* believing your wild tales.” He paused to lean in close and scrutinize a picture that looked to Bones like a lumpy cow. “Anyway,” Isaiah continued, “if you don’t want to help me with this, grab a notebook and start counting the potsherds.”

“Counting the potsherds. Thrilling. Forget it dude, I’ll just stay here.” He moved along the wall, looking with disinterest at the pictographs. Isaiah had called them “fascinating”, said they were the best he’d ever seen. To Bones, all of them looked the same. The same people, the same four-legged beasts, the same weird shapes. Except for one that drew his attention. On the far right end of the rock face, where the overhanging ledge arched down, the wall receded back into the hill. The recessed area looked like it had been bricked over with inch-thick flat rocks and mud. To the left of the bricked in area was a rendering of a person. Unlike the pictographs, this one was a painting, and the fellow in the picture looked like he was bowing down to something or someone.

“Hey, check this out,” he called out to Isaiah. “This one is different.” He ran his fingers along the stone around the edge of the image, wanting to touch it, but fearing he might damage it in some way. His eyes drifted to the stacked rocks closing off the alcove. Perhaps it was his imagination, but they looked like they had been put there intentionally. He touched it with a tentative finger, and

found it solid. He pushed a bit harder to no effect. Stealing a glance at Isaiah, who was still scrutinizing the pictographs, Bones balled up his fist and rapped on the rocks. The sound rang hollow in his ears. There was a space behind there, he was sure of it! He knocked again, harder this time. With a loud clatter the rock wall collapsed, falling back into the empty space behind in a puff of dust. Bones gasped when he saw what lay behind.

“Bones!” Isaiah shouted. “What did you do?” He rushed over to Bones’ side. “I can’t believe you...” Words failed him when he saw what Bones was staring at. His dark face blanched. “It can’t be,” he finally whispered.

Staring out at them, so unlike the simple pictographs that covered the rest of the rocky face, was a detailed cave painting. A man stood in the center of a group. Light shone all around him, creating a glowing aura about his beatific face. Although the artwork was primitive, it was clear that he was not an Indian. He had shoulder-length hair, a moustache, and a beard. He stood with his hands upraised, and all around him the primitive-looking men bowed down to him.

Bones took a step back and shook his head. It was several moments before he found his voice.

“Who in God’s name is that?”