

Note: blue text is included in the published edition as Chapter 6 – a flashback scene – and is presented here because it was part of the original chapter one as well as to provide context for Erica’s deleted escape scene.

These pages have never been copyedited, please forgive any typos or errors.

Chapter One



July 2010

Off the coast of Oaxaca, Mexico

THE MERCILESS NOONDAY sun beat down on the boat deck, draining color from everything but the vibrant blue water. In the distance, Erica could see a yacht anchored above a coral reef, where vacationers probably drank piña coladas while listening to salsa music. Here, on Jake’s boat, the *Andvari*, the crew of six men passed around stolen artifacts and wondered aloud how much they’d get for the exquisitely carved obsidian jaguar, the large jadeite monkey, and the onyx rabbit-motif *pulque* jar.

In spite of the heat, she felt cold and somehow hollow as she stood on the periphery. Jake had looted the shipwreck, and she’d made it possible.

“You didn’t bring up the necklaces,” Marco, Jake’s second in command, said as he placed the *pulque* jar in the conservation tub that would keep the priceless artifact from drying out.

Jake ran his fingers through his short, sun-lightened hair, shaking off water and spraying her with a few drops in the process. “I was on the bottom too long. I’ll bring them up this afternoon, after I’ve had a chance to off-gas.”

The distancing chill vanished. In a flash, she felt the sweltering heat; with it came equally hot anger. “Yeah, it would be a crying shame if you got bent while looting the site.”

Jake laughed. “Still pouting, Erica? I thought you were more pragmatic than that.”

“Make Erica retrieve the necklaces,” one of the crew suggested. “Then the ice bitch can’t pretend she’s innocent anymore.”

But she was already as guilty as the rest of them. She was the one who’d found the cache of Aztec

artifacts and foolishly told Jake, expecting him to honor the excavation permit, which gave him the right to sell Spanish and Asian artifacts recovered from the shipwreck but specifically forbade the removal and sale of pre-Columbian Mexican artifacts. She had believed him when he said she needed to excavate around the artifacts so they could be photographed *in situ*. The photos were supposed to go to the Mexican government so they could decide how to handle the incredible find.

But Jake had lied, and she'd bought his story, hook, line, and diving weights. Now he'd taken the artifacts she'd conveniently excavated for him, violating the permit, her trust, and jeopardizing her reputation as an archaeologist. And, trapped on his boat a mile and a half from shore, there was nothing she could do about it.

"Yeah. Send her down, Jake," Marco said. "Put the bitch in her place." His glare said her place was seventy-five feet deep.

"Leave us," Jake said to the crew. As the men disappeared through the hatch, Jake pulled off his wet suit, revealing a muscular swimmer's body. Weeks ago, she'd found his physique appealing, but now his muscles only served to intimidate her, an effect she suspected he'd been aiming for. Stripped down to his wet swim trunks and deep tan, he put on his sunglasses and stared at her. "What am I going to do with you, Cream Puff?"

When she'd accepted his job offer, she warned him, "*If you're looking for some cream puff to rubber-stamp your decisions, hire someone else.*" He'd laughed, and Cream Puff became his nickname for her.

She looked unflinchingly at his sunglasses but wished she could see his eyes. "Take my advice as a professional underwater archaeologist and return those artifacts to the shipwreck."

"No. But I do give you credit for trying." He fondled the five-hundred-year-old jaguar. "You knew when you took the job, we planned to sell any artifacts we found."

"I'm not stupid. I did my research before signing your damn contract. This Manila galleon sank en route to Acapulco. The ship's cargo was supposed to be trade goods from the Philippines—ivory, porcelain, mercury, perhaps even gems and gold—not cultural relics from Mexico. Trade goods are

all you are permitted to sell.” She pointed to the conservation tubs. “Those Aztec artifacts date back to the time when Spanish conquistadors destroyed Aztec art because they considered it the Devil’s work. They represent a destroyed culture.”

“And they’re worth a lot of money.”

From the moment she took the job, she had stood precariously close to an ethical line, one she’d had no intention of crossing. “You’re violating the permit—a permit *I* got for you.”

“And quadrupling my take for the summer.” He lifted the jadeite monkey from the tub.

Sunlight passed through the jade. The sculpture glowed like sea-green fire, a sight both beautiful and disturbing because transparent jadeite was the most valuable of all. “This little fellow will sell for a million alone—and the necklaces are worth twice that.”

Her hands fisted. “They belong to the people of Mexico.”

He placed the monkey back in the tub and took a step closer. “You really believe that, don’t you?” He cupped her jaw and ran a thumb over her lips. “How far are you willing to go to convince me?”

She jerked away from him. “I’m not a whore.”

“Could have fooled me. You sold your credentials readily enough.”

“You bought my credentials, yes. Not my ethics. Those you stole.”

“Either way, your ethics are gone. So what’s wrong with a fuck between partners in crime?”

“Marco’s your partner. Fuck him.”

He laughed. “I’ve got a contract with your signature on it. You’re in this up to your beautiful gray eyes, Cream Puff. Seems to me you have two choices: shut up and you’ll get your big paycheck as promised; or turn me in and your reputation as an archaeologist will be destroyed, because I’ll send copies of the contract to your graduate advisor at the University of Hawaii. First you’ll be kicked out of the PhD program; then you’ll be blackballed from the profession.”

She felt sick. “You used me.” She’d left her summer field project after her mother’s sudden death

only to discover her mom had stolen her identity and had run up a massive debt in her name. Then Jake showed up with a devil's bargain.

“You chose to work for me.”

“I was desperate.” Her words sounded hollow, and she could no longer justify her choices, even to herself. When he offered her the job, the money had been too good to be true, but she'd ignored her doubts, and now guilt sat in her belly like a lead weight.

“You needed money. I needed an underwater archaeologist to get the permit. Win-win.”

There are two career-ending taboos in archaeology: do not desecrate a grave, and do not buy, steal, or traffic in artifacts. She had been convinced she could maneuver around the taboo by writing about this job for her dissertation—an academic attempt to bridge the chasm that separated treasure hunters from underwater archaeologists. Her goal had been to ensure Jake's excavators collected archaeological data instead of just plundering the ship for trade goods. If the excavation was conducted ethically, she'd believed she'd be able to keep her reputation and earn the money she desperately needed for school.

Her fingernails dug into her palms. “You can't do this. You're destroying my career!”

He took her clenched fist, pried open her fingers, then placed three four-hundred-year-old Spanish doubloons in her palm. He closed her fingers around the coins, pressing to the point of pain. “Only if you force the issue,” he said, his voice low. “If you keep quiet, no one will ever know you worked for me.” Jake walked away. Just before stepping through the hatch, he turned and faced her. “The doubloons are a bonus—payment for your precious ethics.”

Then he was gone, and she was alone on the deck, holding in her hand shameful compensation for every bad choice she'd ever made.

She saw now, when it was far too late, that no matter how good her intentions, taking a paycheck from him was the same as taking the doubloons. She wanted to chuck the coins in the ocean, but the archaeologist in her couldn't cast away an artifact.

Across the turquoise water, the Oaxaca coast was only a mile and a half away. A long swim, but possible with careful planning. If she made a break for it, Jake would probably let her go, but he would still sell the Aztec artifacts. She couldn't let that happen.

She'd been on her own for much of her life, but she'd never felt as alone as she did now. She stood by the railing for a long time, then felt someone behind her and turned to face Marco, who stood only inches away. His cold dark eyes gave her the chills as they swept her from head to toe. He scared her more than anyone else on the crew.

He reached out and grabbed the long braid she wore to fight the heat, and twisted it around his fist. "You aren't Jake's pet anymore, *puta*."

Stomach-dropping fear erased all traces of self-pity. She tried to jerk away, but his firm grip tugged the roots of her hair. Pain burned across her scalp.

"He can't protect you."

She grabbed the hand that held her braid and dug in with her nails while glaring at him.

He swatted her hand. A sharp sting raced up her arm, and she dropped his hand with a convulsive jolt.

He laughed. "You fight like a girl."

"Marco! Leave her alone."

He dropped her braid and swung around to face Jake, puffed up like he wanted to fight. While Jake was taller and more muscular, she didn't doubt Marco's wiry strength. Cold fear shot through her. If he chose to fight his boss for the right to rape her, the outcome was questionable.

Jake stared him down. "Take the tender and pick up the mail. Visit a fucking whore if you need to, but leave Erica alone." Then he turned his angry eyes on her and barked, "Get in your cabin, now!"

She fled, her heart pounding as she ran below. She had to get the hell off this boat.



ERICA WAS IN her cabin, quietly packing her gear, when she glanced through the porthole and saw Marco returning from the marina in the tender. Minutes later, he knocked on Jake's cabin door. She pressed her ear to the wall and could just make out his words.

"...wants to display the Aztec artifacts in a tribal casino in Maryland."

Oh Christ. They had a buyer already.

"We'd have to forge provenance documents if they go on display in the States," Jake said. "The papers would need to be impeccable."

Marco laughed. "You can forge the papers to say some Spaniard found the artifacts in his attic. No one will know they were pulled from this site."

She felt sick. With the right paperwork, no one would know the casino had bought the artifacts illegally. No one—except Erica—would even know a crime had been committed.

"What's the offer?"

"He wants to trade some hot artifacts. I have photos."

She could hear movement but no words. Then Jake said, "Christ! We're supposed to find a buyer for these?"

"With our connections, we can sell them, easy. And we'll get a better price for them than he could."

"Maybe."

"There's more where these came from. A shitload more."

Jake whistled. "Tell him it's a deal."

She sat back on her bunk. She didn't have much time if she wanted to save the Aztec artifacts.



ERICA WAITED UNTIL Jake went diving for the necklaces, then slipped inside his cabin. Jake didn't have Internet on the boat. He was paranoid other treasure hunters—or, she now realized, federal investigators—would hack his Geographic Information System database and see the inventory of the

artifacts they'd retrieved, which were all keyed into the shipwreck map she'd created for him. Jake was similarly paranoid about smartphones. No one on the crew was allowed to have one. So if Marco had photos, they must have arrived in the mail.

In Jake's desk, she found an envelope addressed to Marco Garcia care of the marina, with a postmark from Menanichoch, Maryland. Inside the envelope was a thick stack of photographs. She gripped the edge of the desk when she saw the photos. Years ago, she'd attended special lectures and participated in online forums discussing the disastrous chain of events which led to the loss of all the artifacts shown in the stack of pictures.

Jake planned to trade the Aztec artifacts for relics that had been looted from the Iraq Museum in April of 2003.

She pocketed the envelope with the Maryland postmark and fled back to her cabin. After locking the door, she leaned against it. Her mind raced; fear made her entire body tremble.

How did an Indian casino in Maryland end up with a large stash of Iraqi artifacts? And worse, what would happen after Jake got them?

What a fool she was to think Jake Novak was merely an unethical treasure hunter. He was a high-end dealer in black market antiquities. Her employer was a very dangerous man, and she was stuck on a boat with him. Worse, no one knew where she was.



ERICA RETURNED TO the deck with her camera in her backpack, concealed so she could take discreet photographs. She had just finished positioning the pack when Jake returned to the surface with another float bag, this one holding the two necklaces. Using her camera's remote, she captured him and the bag bobbing on top of the water. Then she snapped pictures of Jake and his whole crew as they pulled the float bag with its valuable contents from the ocean.

Once Jake was aboard, Marco held a bottle of champagne over the rail and popped the cork. She casually set the backpack on the table and aimed the camera at Jake then stepped to the rail and

looked out over the water. The hand that hid the camera remote trembled as she snapped a picture. She watched the cork bob and bounce in the waves. The cork disappeared from view, and she hoped she would escape that easily.

Marco downed his champagne and then showed off one of the necklaces. Several feet long and made of carved shell, quartzite, and obsidian, it was held together with gold links, the shiny beads and metal caught the afternoon sun and brilliant flashes of light danced on the deck. The hundreds of animal-shaped beads were all smaller than a centimeter and the carving was finer than any she had seen in a museum.

Jake was wearing the biggest prize, a priceless cast-gold skull necklace. He winked at her and held up his mug of champagne. With the remote, she snapped a picture. That photograph alone could send him to a Mexican prison. She would hang it on her wall next to his mug shot.

Already she'd taken photos of the artifacts *in situ*. These last photos were the final proof the artifacts were recovered here and not found in someone's attic. She'd turn the photos and artifacts over to the Mexican government...if she made it off the boat.

She took a deep breath, then picked up an empty mug and approached the crew. "I'll take some of that champagne."

"What's this?" Jake looked skeptical. "If you can't beat them, join them?" He would never believe she'd had a change of heart.

"If you can't beat them, get stinking drunk."

For the next several hours she dumped her drinks whenever possible, slurred her words, and pretended to drink heavily. Late into the night Jake cornered her against the railing. "I missed you underwater today. I've gotten used to having you as my dive partner."

She sloshed her drink and said, "Then put the artifacts back."

"You don't give up." He laughed. "We're a lot alike that way." He tugged on her braid. "You have gorgeous hair. When am I going to see it out of that damn braid?"

Marco walked up, grabbed her braid, and twisted it around his fist, pulling her head back. "I like the braid. Gives a man something to hold onto when she's belly down on the deck."

Jake knocked his hand away with a swift chop to the arm. "Hands off. She's mine." He pulled her into his arms, plunged his tongue into her mouth, and groped her butt.

She shoved him away and retched over the side of the vessel. She wasn't acting. His kiss made her sick. She vowed never to braid her hair again.

"She's had too much to drink." Jake started to walk away but stopped when he saw that Marco hung back. "Leave her alone."

"She's a problem."

"My problem. I can handle her."

"If you can't, I will." Marco said then followed Jake, leaving her alone by the railing.

It took her a few minutes to calm her nerves. The nausea was gone, but she groaned and stretched out on one of the padded deck benches. Someone put a bucket next to her in case she puked again. She pretended to pass out.

The crew kept drinking. At one point a couple of them stood over her. "After your fight with her, Jake, we figured you'd let us take turns on her."

"We'd have to ditch her in the ocean if you guys raped her. She's not the type to shut up about it." Jake touched her cheek. "That'd be a damn shame. She gave me a hard-on every time I watched her shimmy into her wetsuit."

"We need to teach her a lesson," Marco said.

Inbale, exhale. Inbale, exhale.

Jake dropped his hand. "No."

She heard them walk away but kept waiting for one of them to come back. Her nerves were raw and her heart pounded with enough force she wondered how it didn't rock the boat.

At one in the morning, the last of the crew made his way to his bunk. She waited another half

hour then grabbed her backpack. The rest of her gear would have to stay behind. First she went to the tender, a small Zodiac, and cut the fuel line, then she raided the conservation tubs and quietly slipped the artifacts in her backpack.

Her heart raced as she took what she needed from the dive locker. She heard footsteps. She pressed flat against the wall, her heart now pounding in her ears. She counted to fifty, then a hundred, trying to stay calm. One look in the empty conservation tubs was all it would take for someone to raise the alarm.

She heard the electronic rumble of the head being flushed then retreating footsteps. She took a deep breath then crossed the deck to the dive platform, where she pulled on her wetsuit and buoyancy vest then grabbed the heavy backpack and silently slipped into the ocean.

She used slow and soundless breaststroke to distance herself from the boat. Two hundred yards out, she stopped and inflated a lift bag then tied off the opening to make a float, so she could attach the heavy backpack and tow it the mile and a half to shore.

She paced herself, taking a break every few hundred yards and was about three hundred yards from shore when she stopped to catch her breath one last time. Her lungs burned and her muscles ached. Treading water, she inflated the vest and floated, resting as the waves rolled around her. She rode up on the crest of a large wave and saw the *Andvari*. Her breath caught. All the lights were on and the spotlight scanned the water.

They knew.

It would take several minutes for the large yacht to rev up and pull anchor, so she turned and swam with all her strength, concentrating on every stroke. They would head toward the marina, knowing she'd aim for the place where her truck was parked.

Her muscles burned and fear drove her. She swam as fast as she could, dragging the float with the backpack. She didn't waste time by looking behind her. The pier drew closer. Just a few strokes more. The water was too shallow here for the *Andvari*. Because she'd cut the fuel line on the

Zodiac, any pursuers would have to swim to shore.

She reached the end of the long wooden pier and pulled on the backpack, kicking off her fins as she reached for the ladder. She climbed swiftly, then ran down the dock, a soaking wet backpack full of gold and carved stone weighing her down. She could hear the boat engines now. Her heart pounded in time with her feet on the pier. The engine sound became louder and louder. They were closing in.

Her shadow flashed in front of her in a blinding ring of white light. They had her in the spotlight. The sharp crack of a bullet pierced the air and she stumbled. Terror kept her upright, and she ran, rounding past the marina store and out of their view, her lungs aching and her breath short.

Her battered old Honda was a hundred feet away. Her hands shook so badly, it took her precious seconds to unlock the door. She slid into the driver's seat, put the key in the ignition and the engine turned over.

The boat engines cut out. She heard yells and splashes. They had to swim only a hundred yards or so to the pier. An easy sprint.

She threw the Honda in gear and pulled onto the dirt road. Her damp foot slipped on the pedal as she clutched into second. She left the coast and turned inland, intending to lose them with a circuitous route through the village before choosing one of three roads that crossed the jungle.

After several minutes her heartbeat began to slow. There'd been no sign of pursuers in the rearview mirror.

She took the eastern road and entered the jungle. Everything in her screamed to head north, toward Mexico City. An official from the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* had signed the excavation permit, and the National Anthropology Museum of Mexico was affiliated with INAH. She had to get to the museum in Mexico City. But that's where Jake would look for her first, and her old Civic was no match for Jake's Hummer.

Thirty miles inland the Honda bucked once, then died. She hit the steering wheel and cursed.

This was it. She'd gambled her life when she took the artifacts, and now she'd lost.

When Jake found her, he'd laugh and say, "*Cream Puff, I knew I'd win.*"

She was no damn cream puff.

I've made it this far. Now I've got to think. If Jake were smart he'd have called the police and claimed she stole the artifacts, which, unfortunately, was the truth. Unless she wanted to spend several years in a Mexican prison, she couldn't be found with the artifacts on her.

She glanced up and down the road. Several meters ahead was a distance sign to the nearest town. After pulling on the soggy sneakers she'd stashed in her backpack, she trudged down the road to the sign, where she laid the artifacts under the sign and took pictures of them with the location marker. Jake couldn't claim these artifacts came from a Spaniard's attic when she could prove they'd been on this remote road in Oaxaca.

She pulled the disk from the camera, aware she had to hide the disk separately from the artifacts. Inside the back stuffing of the driver's seat of the Honda was her best bet, she could access it from a tear in the bottom. She put the disk inside a plastic bag with the doubloons and the empty envelope she'd taken from Jake's cabin. She tucked the bag inside the seat-back and slammed the door closed.

Backpack slung over her shoulder, she stepped into the ominous jungle. To measure the distance she counted her steps and used the compass on her dive watch to track her direction.

Moonlight barely penetrated the jungle canopy and she stumbled on the uneven ground as she burrowed through the thick foliage. She used her flashlight only when necessary, afraid Jake would see the light and find her. The chattering and clicking of insects covered the sound of her progress but she worried she wouldn't hear pursuers.

A distant wail pierced the air. She froze, wondering what sort of nocturnal beast had made the sound, and if it was hungry. But she was in greater danger from Jake than from any jungle animal, and forced herself to resume walking, still counting every step.

Something slithered from under her foot. She gasped and fell, scraping her hip on a sharp branch

on the way down. She flicked on her flashlight and saw the snake escape under a broadleaf plant. She wondered if it was poisonous, and decided she was deep enough in the jungle to use the flashlight.

Her hip throbbed as she walked. Branches snapped in her face and thorns ripped at her skin. Another wail sounded, closer this time, telling her she'd gone far enough. She found a fallen tree, pulled aside the soft, rotted wood at the base, placed the artifacts in the pit, and covered them with leaves and twigs.

What next? She had a compass but no map. She could spend days trying to find another way out of the jungle. She headed back the way she had come, figuring she could walk along the road to that town. Maybe someone there would help her get to Mexico City.

As dawn lightened the sky, she came to the edge of the jungle. She paused and listened. She was far from safe, but Jake couldn't kill her now, not if he wanted to find the artifacts. The road was silent. She left the protective vegetation and stepped onto the road. Maybe a miracle had occurred and her Civic would start. She circled around the front of her old wagon.

A man stepped around the rear bumper and shined a light in her eyes. "*Policía, Senorita Kesling,*" he said. "I've been waiting for you."