

MOKI STEPS

A fast-paced, vividly realistic adventure story that tests character connections, motivations, choices, and chance.

—D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer
MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

... features captivating elements of Aztec culture.

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

MOKI STEPS

J. REED RICH

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first edition

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CHAPTER 1

A TRICKLE OF SWEAT SLID DOWN HER LEFT TEMPLE. MACKENZIE Campbell swiped at the defiant drop, glad her back was to her students. On the white board in front of her she wrote, “The boy gave her the telescope.”

She turned and gazed at them, or rather, at the clock on the wall behind them. “Okay. Who wants to diagram this sentence?”

The summer sun picked its way into her classroom through streaked windows that didn’t open, and dust motes floated around her.

Her hand trembled, and she forced it to her side. This is ridiculous, she thought. I’ve been teaching for a year now. These are freshman college kids. I should be able to call on a student without shaking.

Again she urged the class to respond, turning toward the board. “Come on. This is an interesting sentence. Really.”

A few students tittered.

Mackenzie felt her ears turning red and she imagined their words, low and snarky, behind her back. Sticks and stones, she thought. Ignore them.

Swallowing, she said, “Jerry, why don’t you give it a try?”

A boy with spiky black hair and hipster glasses scanned the room, eyebrows arched over thick black frames. He rose slowly.

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She handed him the marker, avoiding his eyes, and walked to her desk. “You know, Gertrude Stein once said, ‘I really don’t know anything more exciting than diagramming sentences.’ ”

“Then let her do it,” Jerry muttered. The class laughed in unison, like Jell-O wiggling on a plate.

“Who’s Gertrude Sty?” A blonde in the front row asked, frowning.

Mackenzie clamped her mouth shut and sought out the clock again, wrapping her arms around herself in a protective embrace.

It had happened again. She had lost control of the class. Her heart seized in her chest and it took everything she had not to run. It was her, she knew. She was the problem. She just couldn’t convey the importance of the fundamentals. How diagramming sentences would help them understand the intricacies of grammar.

The class was Survey of Linguistics, an interdisciplinary course she had created to fulfill one of the English Department’s composition class credits. It was an experiment she had proposed to her Dean.

And it looked like the experiment was failing.

Her students had complained from the beginning. It wasn’t the easy ‘A’ they had hoped for.

Jerry asked, “Why do we have to diagram sentences?”

“It helps you learn sentence structure.”

“It seems pointless,” he countered. “I’ll never use this in real life.”

“Think of it as the foundation. Like a skill you need for your job.”

“And are there jobs like that?”

“Not many.”

“Do they pay well?”

“Uh,” she floundered, “no.” She couldn’t lie to him. That would break the student-teacher trust she wanted so desperately.

“There you go. I’m more into the flow and the bigger picture.”

She tried again. “Diagramming sentences helps you understand the logic of sentences and the function of words. *That* will help you write better.”

Sherry, a brunette in the back of the class said, “I doubt it. Why would I ever take the time to draw little pictures of the sentences I write?”

Mackenzie understood then that arguing would only make it worse. She just couldn’t persuade them to give it a chance. It struck her that she was the one being tested, not the other way around. That trusting your teacher to be an authority was old-fashioned and naïve. There was the Internet, after all. And YouTube.

Ten minutes remained until the end of class. She walked over to the board and erased the offending words. “I’ll see you all Monday.” She exited, not looking at her students.

Once outside she stopped, waiting for her heart rate to slow. Why couldn’t she do this? She was a professor of linguistics at a top university. She had published papers in prestigious journals—and was considered an expert in Uto-Aztec languages. Why couldn’t she motivate a group of 18-year-olds?

She headed for the parking lot, skirting clumps of students who seemingly rose from the lawn like overgrown bushes. As she walked, her heels punctured the grass, forcing her into an awkward gait.

Safe in her car, she rolled the window down, letting the pungent scent of grass and asphalt and exhaust fumes seep in. She studied her eyes and nose in the visor mirror with dismay and wiped a red slash from her chin. Smudged mascara exaggerated the paleness of her skin, and rebellious strands of coppery hair frizzed about her shoulders.

She closed her eyes. It was Friday afternoon. No more classes today, but she was slated to be in her office to help the students who rarely came. She thought about the survey class and remembered how her ex-boyfriend, Charlie, had complained that she was too traditional, too rigid. That she never tried anything new.

Well, she had tried something new. She had spearheaded this survey class.

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And it had bombed.

Later that afternoon, she lounged on the second-story deck outside her apartment with her friend, Hillary.

“You can’t let them ruffle you.” Hillary poured herself a second glass of Cabernet. “They’re just kids. You have to show them you’re the boss. You know, like dogs. Or is it men?”

They laughed. A soft breeze flicked aspen leaves and ruffled the tips of badly mown grass. The deck, although small, faced east and offered respite from the late afternoon heat. A wooden fence separated the tiny yard below them from the alley, providing the illusion of privacy.

The friends had developed a tradition of spending Friday evenings discussing the week over a bottle of wine. On the surface they were a mismatched set. Mackenzie, lean and angular, almost rangy, was nothing like her short, curvy, oh-so-compelling friend.

Suddenly serious, Hillary continued, “What’s going on, really? I mean you know your stuff. You speak twelve languages, for Christ’s sake. You know linguistics inside and out.”

And I can diagram the first sentence of A Tale of Two Cities, Mackenzie added silently.

“So, what happened?” Hillary leaned in.

Mackenzie slouched on a slatted Adirondack chair, her legs hanging over the wide wooden arm. “I don’t know. You’re the shrink. You tell me.”

“I am not a shrink,” Hillary retorted. “I’m a psychology professor. There’s a difference.”

Mackenzie brought her knees to her chest and smiled. It was a long-running feud between them. “Right, I forgot.” She shifted in her chair. “It sounds so ridiculous, Hill. I love everything about linguistics. And I’m good at it. It seems logical I should teach. But I’m not so sure anymore. I don’t know what it is. I just can’t seem to connect with them.”

“You have to hang in there. It’s the first time for a new class. Creating a curriculum is hard. It’s only the second week of the session. It will get easier. You’ll find your stride.”

“I hope so,” Mackenzie said. “All I know is I’m not getting through.” She munched on a carrot stick.

Hillary traced the rim of her wine glass with a bright pink fingernail. “Well, I think it’s particularly hard for you, because you look so young. And, you’re introverted. The world is not easy for introverts.”

“Introverted meaning ‘nerdy.’ I know what you mean.” Mackenzie held up her wine glass. “And you’re right, I must look young. I still get carded at bars sometimes. At thirty-four years old.”

“You’re complaining about that?”

“Well, I guess I should be grateful, but it’s kind of insulting.”

“Just wait till you’re forty,” Hillary said, raising an eyebrow. “Then you’ll be glad you look young.”

Mackenzie changed the subject. “You know, I’m worried about Garrison. He’s been observing my classes this week. I keep freezing.”

“Mac, department heads always try to intimidate new teachers. Don’t let Garrison worry you. Stop being afraid and trust yourself. You just have to give it some time. How the hell did you pass public speaking in college, anyway?”

Mackenzie swirled her wine, taking a long sip before speaking. “I didn’t. I traded my way out of it. Did extra credit for the department head.”

“Figures. You are a nerd, Professor Campbell.”

“It’s hopeless,” Mackenzie agreed, tipping her glass in a toast.

After Hillary left, Mackenzie sat down at her desk, feeling pleasantly drowsy. As she shuffled some papers aside to make room for her laptop, her cell phone rang. She glanced at it and vaulted out of her chair. The display read, *C.A. Peterson*.

Charlie. Her ex-boyfriend. The phone buzzed around in the papers like a dying insect. She perched on the edge of the desk, watching it.

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She had met Charlie while researching ancient Mesoamerican languages at Arizona State University. He was an exchange student from the University of Utah studying art history. They had shared a few graduate seminars and ended up studying together, drifting into dating without even realizing it. After several months, it had ended badly. He had broken up with her over the phone.

She took a sip of wine and clicked on her voicemail, her heart tap-dancing in her chest.

“Mac, I think I’ve hit on something big. Really big. I need your help. Can you get away for a few weeks? It could mean a lot to your career. Call me as soon as you can.”

She listened to the message again, realizing he hadn’t even asked how she was. It was always about him. Curiosity turned to irritation. How could he call after more than a year and ask for help? After how he had left things? She rose, poured a glass of wine, and called him.

He answered immediately. “Mac. I’m so glad you called me back. What do you think? Can you come out?”

“Where are you, Charlie?” She gulped wine, dribbling it down her chin, and hoped he couldn’t hear the warble in her voice.

“I’m in Page, Arizona. I’ve been working on my dissertation. On Navajo sand painting.”

“Yes, I heard you were getting your Ph.D. Finally.” A barb, she realized, too late. Oh, well.

But he didn’t miss a beat. “Yup. Well, I found something while I was researching the Wetherills. You remember them?”

She searched her memory, recalling that Richard and Louisa Wetherill had operated a trading post in Utah in the 1920s. Richard had found several cliff dwellings—including Mesa Verde—and was known for exploring the Four Corners area.

“I remember a little,” She said. “Didn’t the Navajos call her ‘Slim Woman?’ And let her represent them with the government?”

“Yeah. She even adopted two little Navajo girls. Mac, this woman was awesome. She had this unbelievable collection of sand paintings, so I was looking into her, just poking around. I discovered she collected and translated Navajo legends and myths, and I got sidetracked.”

No surprise there. Charlie might be adventurous, but he had a tough time staying on task.

He continued. “She was so audacious, especially for the time period. Fearless. But she never published anything, and the material she collected on her trips was lost. In fact, most all of what she translated disappeared.” He paused.

“Go on.”

“Well, I found some of her notes.” His voice rose, cracking slightly. She held the cell phone away from her ear.

“O-kaaaaay.” She was intrigued, but annoyed, by his stop-and-go storytelling.

“You won’t believe it. Hear me out. I pieced some things together, and I think I’ve found her translation of a legend about a store of gold. Gold the Aztecs hid from Cortés back when he was wiping them out.”

She laughed. “Gold? Aztecs? Charlie, I think you’ve been in the desert too long. This sounds like a bad movie.”

“Funny. Listen, she wrote about some sort of document, a map or something, that points the way to the gold. The Navajos told her it was hidden in a cave out near Rainbow Bridge. You know, by Lake Powell.”

She put her glass down and sighed.

He surged on. “You see, there’s this Navajo legend about gold hidden by an ancient people. Louisa never looked for it, probably out of respect for the Navajo. But her notes tell where to find it, or really, where to find the map.”

He stopped to take a breath. “If it’s really Aztec, the map’s got to be written in classic Nahuatl. That’s why you have to come. You’re the expert.”

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He was right. She had written her dissertation about vowel shifts in Nahuatl. “I don’t know,” she said. “Tell me more.”

“Come out to Arizona. I want to leave in two weeks. It’s the chance of a lifetime.”

She glanced at the calendar hanging above her desk. “Charlie, I’m teaching two summer sessions. I can’t possibly leave.” Besides, she thought, *I don’t know where we stand.*

The phone was silent.

“Are you still there?” She looked at it, wondering if they’d been cut off.

“Yes.” One word. She could hear the disappointment. Her heart constricted again.

Charlie, true to his nature, pressed on. “Come on, Mac. This is right up your alley. Think of how important it could be for your research. You can always get someone else to take your classes. This is momentous. It could lead to gold, for God’s sake. Montezuma’s legendary gold.”

It would be an extraordinary find, and it *would* help her research. She felt queasy, though, and manipulated. “It sounds interesting. It does. But can’t it wait? I can’t leave until after the sessions.”

There was another long pause. Then, “I thought this would be good for us. And good for you. It’s in your field, after all.”

Her thoughts collided. *Us? There was no ‘us.’* Was he saying he wanted to get back together? She said, “Let me call you after finals. Maybe we could get together and talk about it.”

“Never mind. I’m sure I can find someone else to go.”

“It’s waited this long. Can’t it wait a few weeks longer? It’s too last-minute. I need more info. A little more time. Why the rush?”

But the line was silent. Her ex-boyfriend, once again, had hung up on her.

That Monday, she headed back to her office and found Robert Garrison, her department head, sitting in the chair beside her desk.

He was an imposing man, even when seated. Six-foot-six and powerfully built, he had a ringing bass voice and graying hair he wore a little too long. Although he was a linguistics scholar who ranked among the best, he looked more like a thug. Or a basketball player.

Garrison stood up when she entered the room and remained standing after she sat down at her desk.

“Ms. Campbell. How are you today? And Linguistics 101?”

Mackenzie carefully placed her book bag on the floor next to her, hoping to hide her expression. “The Survey class?”

“Yes. I wondered how you felt about it. In general.”

“It’s all right. Not bad.” She sounded like an idiot. He had to know from the website’s feedback page that her students didn’t think much of the class.

Pacing in front of her desk, he said, “I’m sorry to say this, but it hasn’t been going very well. Your teacher approvals are low. I know you’re a first-year teacher, and so we must be patient. But I want to give you a bit of advice.”

She nodded, not trusting her voice. She stared at a small spider web in the corner of the ceiling.

“Standing in front of the class is not teaching. It is merely the tip of the iceberg.” He paused, and she groaned inwardly. Tip-of-the-iceberg speeches were never good.

“I went out on a limb for you with this new course. It was a bold idea, but I’m afraid you’re just not the one to carry it out. You simply haven’t taken the time to prepare. All good teachers are relentless in their preparation and planning. They know their subject intimately and succeed because they put in the hours.”

He hesitated for effect. “Their iceberg is solid because it is built on the rocks of focused hard work.”

Mackenzie ignored the mangled metaphor and nodded again.

“I want you to spend more time, Campbell. I want you to focus. I don’t want to worry I made the wrong decision backing you.”

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She hoped he wouldn't require a response and resisted the urge to argue with him.

Garrison pulled his lips back, creating the semblance of a smile, and turned, ducking slightly while walking through the doorway. He didn't say good-bye.

She jumped up and closed the door, pulling down the shade. Specks of dust fell silently to the ground.

"Spend more time," she exclaimed. "Spend more time?" Collapsing in her chair, she let her head fall on the desk. The ticking of her wall clock beat a subtle rhythm, and she found herself counting. One-uh, two-uh, three uh, four—

Rat-a-tat-tat. A tat. Startled, she raised her head, afraid Garrison had returned. But when she peeked through the narrow opening between the windowsill and shade, Hillary waved at her.

Mackenzie opened the door, and her friend sailed in.

"Hey, Hill. Don't you have a class now?"

"No, I gave a pop quiz. It was either too easy or too hard. I let them out early." She raised her eyebrows. "What's up?"

"Garrison. Not happy with my teaching. Wants me to spend more time preparing. I got an iceberg lecture."

"Iceberg? You mean, nine-tenths of it under water?"

"Right."

"Oh, Mac, shake it off. He's just that way. A bit of an arrogant ass, that one."

"I can't afford to shake it off. He's not a fan of the new class. He thinks I'm slacking off. It sounded like a warning."

Hillary tilted her head. "You're not taking him seriously, are you? No one spends more time preparing than you. I don't think you need to prepare more—I think you just need some time off. What are you doing after this session? You're not teaching the second summer session, are you? It's only a three-week mini-session. Skip it."

"I can't. I already told Garrison I would teach a basic Grammar class. It's in the catalog." She sank into the chair next to her desk. "I'd only be teaching one class, so I could get ready for fall at the same time." She studied her friend. "Hill, I need your opinion on something. Something else."

"What?" Hillary angled one hip on the edge of the desk.

"Well, Charlie called Friday. Right after you left, actually. He wanted me to check out something he's been researching. In Arizona." She recounted Charlie's request.

"Aztec gold?" Hillary's deep voice rose half an octave. "You've got to be kidding. Oh, Mac, I don't even know Charlie, and I think he's lost it."

"I know. That's what I thought, too. So, of course I said no."

Hillary cocked her head. "It's probably just Charlie's way of stringing you along. He knows you're still hung up on him."

"Me? I'm not still hung up on him. It's been more than a year."

"Please. I can see it in your face. You said he broke your heart, remember?"

Of course she remembered—how could she not? He *had* broken her heart. But he'd also made her laugh, and he'd held her, and she had loved him. And for a while he had loved her back.

"Mackenzie?"

"Sorry. Sorting it out in my head."

"Nothing to sort. Don't glorify it. From what you've told me, he was a selfish bastard."

Mackenzie nodded. She knew she should be angry with him, but at the moment all she could remember was the way his voice cracked and grew raspy when he was excited. The way he knew a little bit about everything. His brilliant blue eyes and blonde hair. And how he had pushed her to do new things.

Hillary broke the silence again. "I know you think he was fun. Of course, that's seductive. But you told me he was never there for you,

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that he was more of a playmate. I just don't think he could be serious long enough. Or stay in one place."

"I know," Mackenzie agreed. "But, well, some of what he said makes sense. After he called, I Googled Louisa Wetherill. Everything he told me—about her lost notes, I mean—was true. She was going to publish a book, but her health gave out."

"I'm sure there's something to it," Hillary said. "Maybe not Aztec gold, but something. But do you want to get involved with him again?"

Mackenzie let it drop. She was tired of arguing.

Hillary switched to discussing her Abnormal Psych class and the difficulty of designing a good pop quiz. Mackenzie hoped she looked like she was paying attention.

Pausing, Hillary continued in a softer voice. "Listen to me. Put this Aztec stuff out of your head. It's crazy."

Yup, Mackenzie thought, it was. "You're right, Hill. I know you're right."

CHAPTER 2

CHARLIE'S PROPOSED TRIP DATE PASSED BY UNNOTICED, and Mackenzie redoubled her efforts to impress Garrison. *She had never been called unprepared in her life.*

On the last day of the session, she returned from lunch to find a single cardboard envelope on her desk. There was no return address, and the label didn't tell her anything. She picked it up, but it appeared empty. Probably a clever ad campaign for underarm deodorant. Covering it with a pile of final exam books, she dumped everything into her canvas book bag.

After locking up her office, Mackenzie trudged across the campus green. With less than half an hour before the final exam she had to give that day, she wanted to arrive early.

The final went smoothly, and her mood lifted. She was finished with teaching until the next summer session. She thought of Charlie and the trip. She had wanted him to be the love of her life. When he told her he wanted to break up, it had crushed her.

Her steps were heavy as she slogged across campus. She headed for the library to learn more about Charlie's story.

Crossing the threshold, she inhaled the earthy smell of books and paused. Amber light filtered through leaded glass windows, and a

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card catalog with monitors stood in the center of the room, flanked by rows of bookshelves. Two rows of computers hummed in the alcove on her left.

After tracking down a few references, she found a cozy chair in a corner. When she looked up, it was eight-thirty. Although the library remained open until midnight, her office building shut down at nine o'clock on weeknights.

She checked out a few books on the electronic pad and jogged through the stacks. Bounding down the steps, she narrowly avoided the bronze sculpture guarding the building.

The University of Denver was small for a university. She ran into several students she knew on her way to her office and nodded at each. She must look ludicrous, with her overstuffed book bag and disheveled pile of papers. A true cliché. She slowed her pace and finger-combed her bangs before entering the building.

She headed to the garden level, a large space with a rabbit warren of cubicles and offices. Her office was in the back, and she navigated the aisles in the dim light.

Leaning against her office door to fish out her keys, she toppled backward into the dark office. What the hell? She scrambled up to flick on the light switch. And froze.

Something was wrong.

Someone had broken into her office.

Mackenzie never left the door unlocked, much less slightly ajar. Although she wasn't exactly a neatnik, the mess she encountered wasn't hers. Books were strewn on the floor, desk drawers left open. Files were scattered about, and papers carpeted the floor. Her heart rate doubled. Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself. Relax, she told herself. No one was in the office now.

The wastebasket under her desk lay on its side, with crinkled papers and a cardboard coffee cup next to it. Somehow it was too much. Tears flooded her eyes. She had to report this, but she had to

get out of there first. Pulling her book bag back onto her shoulder, she turned. And screamed.

“Are you all right?” A uniformed campus security guard stood there, blocking the way.

She looked up into small button-eyes behind thick glasses. A tall man with sparse gray hair stood before her. She didn’t recognize him, but she didn’t know everyone on the security staff. She pressed the bag to her chest, flushing. She had bumped into him, not the other way around.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I thought...”

“Ma’am. Everything okay?”

“Uh, yes. I mean, no. Someone’s been in my office. Someone’s broken into my office.”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s why I’m here. Heard a report of someone hanging around the building earlier.” He strode past her into the room, trampling books and papers alike. “Did you see anyone? Is anything missing?”

“I didn’t see anyone. And I haven’t checked if anything is missing.” She gazed at the mess. It would take forever to go through it all.

“How long have you been here?” He stood in front of the window, which she noticed wasn’t quite shut. Had she left it open?

“Ma’am?”

“I left Penrose at half-past eight to get my grade book.”

“Your office was locked?”

“It should have been. But it wasn’t when I got here.”

“Why don’t you look around to see if anything’s missing. I’ll be here. You’ll be safe.” He crossed his arms and smiled, revealing yellow teeth. A faint odor of stale garlic assaulted her, and she coughed.

She scanned the room again. Kneeling, she picked up her grade book and placed it in her bag.

“What are you taking?”

“Just my grade register.”

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“You didn’t leave your mail here, did you? No packages or deliveries?”

Mackenzie shook her head, watching as he continued to study the room. She pressed her back against the doorway, looking over her shoulder into the outer room. “Shouldn’t we call the police?”

After observing her for a moment, he shrugged and turned to leave. “Probably frisky students. I wouldn’t worry.”

It occurred to her then she didn’t know his name. Didn’t security guards wear name badges? She couldn’t remember.

“Could you, I mean, would you walk me to my car?” She struggled to keep up, but her stride was no match for his.

He called back over his shoulder, “Ma’am, you have a good night. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

An hour later, she sat on her sofa with a peanut butter sandwich. It’s nothing, she told herself. Probably a prank of some kind. Students did crazy things during finals.

She sighed. It would be better to stay busy. She sorted final exams into different piles on the cushions with one hand, holding the sandwich in the other. At the bottom of her book bag, she found the oversized envelope she had received earlier. Stuffing the rest of the sandwich into her mouth, she wiped her fingers on her robe and ripped the envelope open.

A folded sheet of smudged notebook paper, much too small for the envelope that contained it, fell to her lap. It was a pencil drawing of what seemed to be mountains connected to a large stone arch. At the top of the peak were two X’s, with a dashed line drawn parallel to the sheer cliff face. The line ended with a large arrow pointing to a hole, or cave, in the rock. Another arrow pointed to a place at

the bottom of the cliff with the words “Painted Rock, near Rainbow Bridge. Codex.”

“This is from Charlie,” she muttered to herself. She turned the sheet over, looking for a note or explanation. Nothing.

Rainbow Bridge. Charlie had mentioned the place, but she blanked on the details. Was it in Arizona or Utah? Leaning over the stack of finals, she picked up one of the books on the Wetherills and flipped through the index to the entry.

Ah, it was actually on the border, she found. She glanced at another reference over on the desk and rose awkwardly, knocking the envelope off the coffee table. It fell to the floor next to the sofa. As she bent over to pick it up, a very small camera memory card fell out.

Frowning, she blew on it. What was this? She crossed to her desk and inserted it into her laptop. A folder with fifty or more numbered image files filled the screen. Clicking on an image, she sat back to wait for it to load—and immediately sat up when the image came into focus. Squinting, she enlarged it to get a better look.

The images on the screen appeared to be photographs of pages with pictures or symbols. Most of the figures were drawn in black on a white background. Large square symbols bordered the edges of the pages—dates and page numbers, she knew. The centers of the pages were covered with drawings and smaller symbols.

She quickly scanned the remaining images. Leaning back, she stared unseeing at the ceiling. It seemed to be a complete pre-Spanish Aztec codex. If it was authentic, it would be the only one left in the world.

CHAPTER 3

“HI, THIS IS CHARLIE. I’M HERE. ARE YOU THERE? PLEASE leave a message after the beep.”

Mackenzie grew more and more irritated by Charlie’s voicemail message. “Charlie, this is my fourth message. I *am* here. Where the hell are you? I need to talk to you. Please, please call me back.”

She rested the cell phone on the car seat beside her. Glancing at it, she checked the sound for the third time and then moved it to her lap. She wasn’t going to miss his call.

Pushing her bangs back, she glanced down at the phone, then swerved to avoid hitting a median. She was tired and distracted—not a good combination—and she grew more and more worried with each tick of the clock. She would call him again when she got to school, she thought. Why wasn’t he answering her calls?

She sped down Evans Avenue, passing under the glassed-in skyway that spanned the street. As she pulled into the parking lot next to Hillary’s building, her tires squealed, and she glanced nervously around. No one seemed to care.

Five minutes later she sat in Hillary’s office.

“Now, what’s this about?” Hillary arched a perfectly tweezed eyebrow and fingered the pearl necklace resting above her ample chest.

She wore an electric blue silk blouse and black skirt that flounced when she sat down.

Mackenzie dropped her bag on the floor and paced. She wasn't sure where to begin. "Well, remember how Charlie claimed he had discovered something big?"

"Is this about Charlie again? Are you still obsessing over him?"

"Wait. Yes. No. I mean, yes, it's about Charlie. He sent me something."

Her friend leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. "What?"

"A memory card with images of the codex."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'd have to study it further, but the codex seems complete. If it's real, it would be an amazing, history-changing discovery. We have no complete records of the Aztecs written by them—just stuff the Spanish wrote, which we know was biased and probably riddled with errors and omissions. A genuine codex that showed how the Aztecs lived would be worth millions."

"Still sounds fishy to me."

"There's more. The first part of the codes is like a history of the Aztec people. But the last part seems to be a map to the ancient homeland of the Aztecs. They called it Aztlan."

She paused, gauging Hillary's expression. "I'm still working on it, but it fits the legends. Like I said, the story is that the Aztec king Montezuma hid a stash of gold there to keep it from Cortés. In a cave in Aztlan."

Hillary frowned.

"But I'm worried. I can't reach Charlie."

"He could be out of range, Mac."

"Maybe. But it feels like something's wrong."

"Give it a few days. I'm sure he'll surface."

Mackenzie nodded. That would be the logical, reasonable thing to do. She tried to ignore the feeling of dread in her gut.

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The next morning Mackenzie stood by her desk, letting the sunlight warm her shoulders. Her back ached. She left another message for Charlie, again with no response.

Stuffing everything into her book bag, she left for school. She wanted to clean up her office and check her mailbox for a letter from Charlie. Maybe he had sent her something else.

When she walked out to her car, a man leaning against a black sedan glanced up and then down quickly, turning his face away from her. She quickly got into her car and locked the door. Her neighborhood, although quickly becoming gentrified, was not exactly safe yet.

As she pulled out of her parking space, her phone rang, and a number she didn't recognize appeared on the display. Thinking Charlie might be using a different phone, she answered, but the caller hung up. She slowed down to check the display, and a car behind her honked. A dark sedan slid into traffic a few cars back.

She wrinkled her nose. Her sweat stank. She glanced in her rearview mirror. Was it the same sedan that had been parked outside her house? She couldn't tell.

She pulled into the drive-through lane of her favorite coffee shop. Two cars idled in front of her, and she noticed a dark sedan parked on the street a few yards from the shop. She hit the accelerator automatically and had to brake to avoid ramming the car in front of her. Calm down, she told herself. There were probably thousands of dark cars in Denver.

When she exited the drive-through, the sedan pulled out from its spot on the street into the lane behind her, slowing down. She couldn't quite make out the license plate. It abruptly switched lanes again, and she couldn't see it.

She turned onto Evans, heading toward the faculty parking lot. Instead of turning in, she drove under the glass skyway. She turned into a narrow alley behind a frat house and coasted into a small parking space next to a large evergreen bush.

Maybe she shouldn't go into her office today. Maybe she should just turn around. She sipped her coffee, trying to sort out her thoughts.

"No, I've got to do this," she said aloud. In one jerky movement, she grabbed her things and jumped out of the car, making for a gap between the bushes and the frat house. She ducked, waiting. A moment later, the dark sedan glided slowly past her, like a shark on the prowl. The windows were deeply tinted.

Without thinking, Mackenzie dashed the opposite way down the alley and crossed the street to the community center, which provided access to the skyway.

The cool passage of mirrored aqua glass threw a blue cast on the street below. A long bench ran along one wall, and tables and chairs were scattered about randomly. A coffee kiosk stood under a mounted flat screen TV near the opposite door. A few students lingered near the kiosk, gazing up at the news on the screen.

She sat down at the first empty table and stared down at cars threading their way through groups of students. No sign of the sedan. Minutes passed and nothing disrupted the scene below. Her heart returned to its normal rhythm, and her breathing slowed.

She had almost talked herself into going to her office when she spotted a dark sedan. With a sickening fascination, Mackenzie watched as it turned into the faculty parking lot. A tall gray-haired man in a suit got out. She draped herself over her table, trying to see his features. He looked directly at her.

It was the security guard who had been in her office. Mackenzie ducked, even though she knew he couldn't see her through the glass. She slammed her shoulder on the table edge and swore loudly. Several students looked over, then went back to their conversations.

The man walked toward the skyway and gazed up for several minutes before entering the sedan. It left immediately, swerving silently through traffic and pedestrians.

J. Reed Rich

Shit. She retrieved her laptop. She decided to stay put for awhile.

She searched for hotels in Page. Maybe she could find out where Charlie was staying. He usually camped out, but she wanted to be thorough.

In the search engine findings, a headline stood out: MAN LOST IN CANYONS NEAR PAGE, ARIZONA. FEARED DEAD. She clicked on the story.

Page police have been searching the area of Navajo Mountain for a missing Utah man.

Charles E. Peterson, 36-year-old graduate student attending the University of Utah, was last seen four days ago at the Holiday Inn in Page. According to hotel desk clerk Stephen Andrews, Peterson left the hotel to camp overnight near Navajo Mountain. When Peterson failed to return, Andrews notified the police.

Because Navajo Mountain is on Navajo land, Page Police and the Navajo Nation Patrol will conduct the search jointly. A command post has been set up in that area.

Peterson is described as being 5 foot 10 inches tall, 160 pounds, with blond hair and brown eyes. He was last seen wearing a red t-shirt and gray or khaki cargo pants. Police ask that anyone having information contact officer George Cardiff, who is handling the investigation.

She read the words again. They swam into one another, becoming meaningless symbols. Charlie missing? Lost in the canyons?

She should have gone with him. She should have taken the risk. It had been a simple decision with simple words: Yes or No. If she had gone with him, maybe he wouldn't have gotten lost. Now, it might be too late.

Mackenzie forced herself to drive the speed limit to the airport. She was jittery and nervous. The airport, twenty-five miles east of the city, sat alone on the plains like a clump of white circus tents. It was almost five o'clock; her flight left at seven. In the previous three hours she had purchased new clothes, a rolling duffle bag, a one-way ticket to Page, and depleted most of her savings. And had either been fired or quit. She wasn't sure which.

She trolled for a close-in parking spot. The airport itself wasn't busy; the security lines were short, and she made it to the gate in plenty of time. She let her thoughts drift back to her last conversation with Garrison.

"Had you been with me for, say, ten years or so," he had boomed, "I would consider your request to not teach the summer semester. Had we ample time to get to know one another, I would take it under advisement. As it is, you are without tenure, with a mere year's worth of teaching experience, and no research to speak of. You are still on probation and have yet to prove yourself. We are not family yet. If you refuse to teach an assigned class, I must emphasize your standing at this university would be in jeopardy." He smiled then, lips curving into a thin line. "Of course, it is entirely your decision."

She had felt like a child, and the blood had rushed to her face. Surprisingly, instead of wanting to cry, her anger had flared. She sat up straighter. "Professor Garrison, I'd only miss the mini summer-session class. I'd never ask to take time off during the regular school year. I will prove myself. I just need a few weeks."

"The length of the class or when it is scheduled is irrelevant. All classes at the University of Denver are important. I must reiterate that not teaching would place you in a precarious place. However, it is up to you." He stood in front of her, staring down his broad nose. "Remember, if you leave you may find yourself without a position when you return. And you will have lost credibility among your peers."

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It was unreal. She was hot and tired. Her office had been rifled, Charlie was lost in the canyons, and someone was following her. She forced her face into an expressionless mask.

During her silence, which he took as acquiescence, Garrison sat down behind his desk, a satisfied smile on his lips.

That did it. Not looking at him, she bent down to get her things, and then unfurled to her full height. Seated, in his charcoal suit and Jerry Garcia designer tie, he was much shorter than her. She no longer felt like a twelve-year-old. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but I’ve got to help my friend. If you decide to fire me for that, well, that’s up to you. I won’t be teaching the class. I’m going to Arizona.”

Turbulence brought her back to the present. Tugging the window shade down, she closed her eyes and let the hum of the engines lull her. Exhaustion pinned her to her seat, and she didn’t resist. In her half-sleep, Aztec symbols turned into graffiti on dirty city walls, and gray smog produced plumes of fire.

An hour later, she rolled her head from side to side, rubbing her neck. She lifted the window shade. The landscape below had changed dramatically. The earth was streaked by tans and grays, and she could see long blue fingers reaching out from a larger azure body. Lake Powell and its side canyons, she guessed. Next to it stood a dark volcanic mountain. She settled back, checking her seat belt.

Thirty minutes later, the plane bumped down the runway on a mesa near Page, Arizona.

The small airport was dilapidated and seedy. Descending a set of stairs that creaked in protest, she stepped directly onto the tarmac. An acrid odor assaulted her. In the heat, the soft asphalt sucked up the heels of her shoes, forcing her to tip-toe. It was like walking on black taffy.

Even at almost nine o’clock in the evening, the sun still shone brightly. Mackenzie lifted her bangs off her forehead and plodded after the stragglers of fellow passengers toward the terminal.

After a few minutes her mood was as dark and gummy as the surface she crossed.

But small airports, she found, had their advantages. When she entered the building, she could actually watch her bag arrive on the cart. There were fewer guards than at most airports, and even a few smiling faces. The pastel Southwestern theme calmed her.

She leaned gratefully against the information counter. "Where can I get a taxi? Or do you have a shuttle to the Holiday Inn?"

The short, tanned man behind the counter shook his head. "It's just a few blocks, ma'am. Take Sage Avenue and turn right on Navajo. Hardly worth a taxi. Most folks walk." He handed her a photocopied street map.

Muttering to herself, Mackenzie folded the map, stuffing it in her bag. *Walk. Okay. She could do that. Shit.*

In ten minutes she was out in the heat again. She trekked the half-mile to the Holiday Inn, her new red tweed duffle tottering along behind her on the narrow sidewalk. She fought to keep sweat out of her eyes and dust out of her nose. Pickup trucks crunched when they passed, flinging sand and gravel and dirt, and she had to stop every few feet to right her overturned bag. Her grimy and matted hair felt like a squirrel's nest.

She looked down, her sunglasses slipping to the tip of her nose. Her brand-new celery-green linen pants, which she had hoped would be cool, were now wrinkled like an old woman's skin. To top it off, her shoes were ruined.

Mackenzie continued down Sage Avenue. "I must be crazy," she informed a tumbleweed, kicking it savagely out of the way.

Turning on South Navajo Drive, she spotted the hotel. Surrounded by small adobe houses and shops, it stood like an oasis in the deepening sunset. The place looked unnatural: green grass covered rolling hills, bougainvillea fluttered like tethered butterflies, and palm trees waved a welcome. She hoped it was a good omen.

CHAPTER 4

AT SEVEN O’CLOCK THE NEXT MORNING, MACKENZIE RATTLED down a rutted dirt road in her rental car. The coffee in her cup holder was bitter, but she took a sip anyway, grimacing.

So this was Page. From what she could tell, the town had never quite grown into itself. Lacking the glitz of a tourist attraction and the charm of the frontier, it was neither.

The landscape, however, was entrancing. Earthy reds and coppery browns folded into layers and layers of sage greens. Tans split the colors. A cyan blue sky set off the rock walls and plains.

She was growing more and more anxious about finding Charlie. When she had last called his cell phone, the message simply said, “The number you have dialed is not in service.”

She bumped along, searching. A glint of white caught her eye, and she slowed, pulling up behind a police cruiser. A bullish man with a salt-and-pepper crew cut and sunglasses faced her, legs wide apart, hands behind his back. She blinked, knowing she wouldn’t get much from him. There was a reason for stereotypes.

She crossed the road to the so-called command post, which was little more than the car, some pitiful junipers, and a cooler. “Hi. I’m Mackenzie Campbell. I’m one of Charlie Peterson’s friends. You must be Officer Cardiff.”

Nothing.

“Charlie. You know, the man who disappeared?”

The policeman inclined his head in a quick, controlled movement, and crossed his arms over his chest.

Steeling herself, she crossed her arms, too, mirroring him. She spent several minutes trying to extract information, but he was taciturn at best, responding with single-syllable answers. She heard just the slightest accent in his words and inflection. Boston, or Baltimore, she decided.

She circled to his left, forcing him to alter his stance, and pointed at a slender, overgrown trail leading up a hill toward some swells of slickrock. “Is that the trail he followed?”

“Could be.”

She tried again. “So, you’re not going to check it out further?”

“Nope.”

“Why not? Wasn’t that where he was headed? Isn’t that what the desk clerk reported?”

“Maybe.”

She hoped he couldn’t see her roll her eyes behind her sunglasses. They weren’t mirrored, like his. “Well, what are you going to do?”

“Give it a day or so.” Cardiff took his glasses off and wiped them on his shirt sleeve. He didn’t meet her gaze.

“Okay, but if he did follow this trail, where would it lead?”

“Couple of places. Forbidding Canyon. Red Bud Pass. Rainbow Bridge.” It was the longest sentence she’d gotten out of him.

“Rainbow Bridge? This is a trail to Rainbow Bridge?”

“Mmpf,” he grunted.

She took it for a yes. “Uh, how long a hike is it?”

“Well, from here, it’s about fifteen miles, hard and steep. It’s the old trail. Not used much. It’d take three days, maybe four, if you don’t get lost.”

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“Charlie might have taken this very trail. Have you looked at Rainbow Bridge for him?” She was growing irritated. “Or any other places?”

“No.”

“Well, why not?” She batted a fly buzzing near her ear.

“Lady, he could have gone anywhere. Some of the trails are on Navajo land, so we can’t just take over. The ball’s in their court now.”

She took a few steps past him up a small mound and appraised the trail, her back to him. Beyond the slickrock, a wall of jagged rocks rose. “Can I hire someone to take me on that trail? Or another trail? To the bridge?”

“Yeah. But I wouldn’t recommend it.”

It was difficult not to categorize his accent. Definitely Boston. “Why not?”

He sat down on the cooler, setting his glasses on his knee. He spoke to her in a clipped voice. “You gotta have a permit. From the Navajo Nation. A guide. The trails aren’t maintained, and they’re tricky. It would be quicker on the lake, anyways. You could hire a boat and be there in a few hours.”

She spun around. “A boat. I can get to Rainbow Bridge by boat? And I don’t need a permit?”

“No. Just gotta get a guide.”

She scrounged in her bag for some paper. Writing her name and number on an old grocery receipt, she held it out and asked him to call if he heard anything. He stood up, glancing first at the scrap of paper and then at her. He made no move to take it; instead, he put his sunglasses on and his hands behind his back. She sighed and, grabbing a rock, secured the note to the cooler. She turned and left, not bothering to say goodbye.

The dust plumed behind her in the rearview mirror while she drove off. In the rearview mirror, she could see him watching her car long after the dust had settled on the road.

Wahweap, the largest marina on Lake Powell, stood alone in a small cove on the lake, nestled between water and slickrock. Mackenzie waited on the dock, stretching her neck, and rocked from side to side, lifting first one cheek and then the other off the windbreaker she sat on. The planks forming the splintery dock were hot and rough, and she didn't want to touch them.

Cosmo Sullivan had come highly recommended by Stephen, the hotel desk clerk. Best guide on Lake Powell, he had told her. Apparently, Sullivan lived year-round on his houseboat, guiding and giving kayak lessons on the side.

She shook her head. Living off tourists. Probably rented his houseboat to drunken frat boys. She was sure she wouldn't like him. She couldn't like him on principle. Besides, anyone who would show up thirty minutes late for an appointment was rude and, by her definition, unlikeable. Well, she didn't have to be his best friend. He just had to take her to Rainbow Bridge.

She slapped at a gnat whirring about her, irked. A lot of things were irksome here. The heavy blanket of heat smothering her. The relentless sun. The teasing wind, which should have been cool, but which was nothing but hot, hot, hot. She had waited half an hour for this guide. She was wilted, sweaty, and hungry. Not a good combination.

They had spoken on the phone—a short, clumsy conversation—and were supposed to meet at the marina, slip eight, at noon. Her watch read 12:35. She lifted her ponytail off her neck. Although just shoulder length and fine, her hair soaked up the heat. Even that bothered her.

A small power boat zoomed toward the dock where she sat. It had to be him. As it neared, she knew she had been right—she wouldn't

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like Cosmo Sullivan. She stood, watching him race straight at her. Banking the boat alongside the dock, he didn't glance up. No wave or smile. Like he had dropped by to see someone else. Thirty-five minutes late.

When he drew closer, she could see he had brown hair and was tall. Tan and sinewy, he resembled a dried pecan. His faded green t-shirt stuck to his body above his khaki shorts. He might be good looking, she thought, if it weren't for the craggy furrows lining his face and the brown stubble covering his chin. And his expression.

He bounded onto the dock, and she watched with dismay as a group of men mobilized. One shook Sullivan's hand, while two others tied up the boat. A good-old-boys reunion. She progressed from irked to irritated.

After chatting with his buddies, Cosmo Sullivan turned to her, studying her. She stared back at him.

"You the one wanting a guide?"

"Yes. I'm Mackenzie. Mackenzie Campbell."

"Mackenzie? Isn't that a boy's name? Means 'son of Kenzie,' or something?"

"Yes. It's a family name." And none of your business, she added, to herself. How old was this joker? As a girl's name, 'Mackenzie,' had become distressingly trendy of late.

He shoved a hand through his hair, and she noticed his hairline was receding. He pulled a sweat-stained baseball cap out of his back pocket.

"What do you go by? Red?"

She bristled. She had fought being called 'Red' all her life. Why did people think they could call her that just because of her hair color? She didn't call brunettes, 'brownie' or blondes, 'blondie.'

"Mackenzie will be just fine," she said.

He laughed. Against his tan, his teeth were almost too white. Model white. Trim and fit, with that broad smile, he looked assured and at ease—like a confident, easy-going asshole.

She asked, "Do you go by Cosmo? Or should I call you 'Cos?'"

He stopped laughing and their eyes met. She was surprised by their vivid blue. He pulled a pair of sunglasses from another pocket and put them on.

Suddenly she was aware of her appearance. Most of her hair had escaped her ponytail and was whipping about her face. Her mascara had probably glopped around the rims of her eyes. Her damp, white camp shirt clung to her breasts and torso, and her shorts sat an inch lower than she liked. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and crossed her arms over her chest.

"You may call me Sullivan," he said. "Or Sulley. I really don't answer to anything else." He turned. "Come on, Slim."

"My name is Macken—" Damn. He had started without her. Obviously, the discussion was over. Snatching her windbreaker, she chased him up the stairs to the hotel's bar.

Ten minutes later she reclined in the shade of the patio cover with a glass of iced tea and found her mood changing. They hadn't spoken for several minutes. Across the table from her he sipped on a margarita, staring at the water through his sunglasses.

The lake was immense, with small islands of rock poking up like shark fins. Every few minutes, boats full of tourists putt-putted by. The rocks had a definite bathtub ring; the lake, she'd learned, was receding at an alarming rate. She relaxed, letting herself enjoy the scene. She decided to let go of her first impressions of Sullivan. How could anyone remain angry in such a place? She felt a growing bond with the man next to her, this complete stranger. And envious. He lived in paradise.

Sullivan clinked his glass down on the table, and she tried to remember why she had come to the lake. Ah, yes. To rescue Charlie.

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“I’d like to hire you to take me to Rainbow Bridge,” she said. “You go there, don’t you?”

He waited a beat before responding. “Yes, I go there. Do you want a boat tour or to go by kayak?” He shook the glass, tipping it to dislodge the ice. “I’m guessing by boat.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, the boat ride is fast. From Wahweap, it takes about five hours. Give or take. By kayak, it’s slower, more scenic. I usually run a five-day trip, with excursions down slot canyons, depending on the clientele. I offer a three-day trip, too.” He crunched on a cube of ice. “I usually recommend going by kayak. That way you really see the canyons, get to know them. You can almost feel the colors change with the light as the water moves under you.”

The picture he painted was surprisingly intimate. She took a drink and, out of habit, mentally placed him linguistically. His sentences were well formed and complex, his vocabulary sophisticated, his cadence almost musical. Educated. Old money. He had traveled a lot and had a slight East Coast accent, with a touch of something else. The South? She’d have to hear more.

He continued. “You’re only interested in Rainbow Bridge? Nothing else?”

She lied. “Yes, just the bridge. But I’d want to stay a day or so. Can you do that?”

“Not by boat. By kayak, yes.”

“Okay, kayak, then.” It would be slower, but she needed time to look for Charlie. Charlie. She hadn’t thought about him at all during the conversation with Sullivan. “The three-day trip. How much does that cost?”

He considered. “Just you?”

She nodded, hoping he had staff who helped on the tours. She didn’t want to be alone with him; something about him rattled her.

“You over twenty-one?”

Mackenzie bit back her response, trying to remain agreeable, and nodded. She couldn't tell if he was serious or not.

"For three days and two nights, it's an even thousand."

"Dollars? A thousand dollars? For three days?"

"We provide all the equipment and meals," he said, ignoring her outburst. "Show you where to camp. Guide you to Rainbow Bridge. Keep you safe." He paused. "A thousand is a good deal."

She deliberated: Would telling this man her mission lower the price? She could try playing on his sympathy. No, she decided. She couldn't tell anyone just yet. And he didn't appear to be the sympathetic type.

"Uh, I guess that'd be fine. Can we leave tomorrow morning? And do you take travelers checks?"

He drained his margarita and licked the last flakes of salt on the rim. "Tomorrow? No can do. I'm all booked up. Taking a group on a month-long expedition. An archaeological trip. I could take you in six weeks. Give or take."

"What? You can't be serious. Why did you meet with me, then, if you knew you were busy?"

A couple next to them stared openly, and she realized she was shouting. She normally never raised her voice. She added, much more calmly, "Why couldn't you have told me that on the phone when I first called?"

"Had no idea you wanted to go so soon."

"Well, you could have asked. Instead of showing up late and then completely wasting my time. Thanks for that. I'm sure I can find someone else to take me."

"Won't find anyone this late."

"We'll just see about that. I'm sure there are other guides who aren't so, so rude."

He stood up, cap in hand. "Look. You didn't say what you wanted, or when. I'm afraid it's a busy time for me, Slim. And the month-long

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gig I mentioned is a good one. It's a large group—too many if you ask me—but they pay well, so I'm not complaining.”

She gaped at him, speechless.

“You won't be able to book a trip with anyone else this late and on such short notice. I can take you in five or six weeks, depending on who's before you. Take it or leave it.” He pulled a card from his shirt pocket and dropped it on the table. Without waiting, he sauntered out of the restaurant.

Mackenzie fumed, spending the drive to her hotel in Page coming up with too-late, but satisfying, smart-ass quips. She must have appeared angry, because the desk clerk, Stephen, raised his eyebrows as she entered. She forced a smile, willing herself to relax. He smiled back and looked her up and down.

Men. Anger swelled in her again, and she decided she would confront the little twerp. She took one step and stopped. She needed him. He was her sole friend, she thought, with a shock.

Her anger flipped to fear. What was she doing here in this little town? What the hell was she trying to prove? Her stomach tightened into a hard knot. She had no plan, no strategy, no safety net of any kind. How would she be able to find Charlie? What if the codex was a fake? She was risking her career and reputation on a whim. On Charlie, the man who had dumped her. Her situation seemed even more precarious than before.

Stephen was occupied checking in a couple and their two children, tapping at his computer behind the desk. She slid into one of the armchairs in the lobby, and to distract herself picked up *The Lake Powell Chronicle*.

On the front page, in 80-point caps, the headline read: VISITING EXPERTS TO CATALOG ANCIENT GLYPHS. Curious, she read on. Apparently, an amateur anthropologist from Kanab, Utah, and a

team of researchers were about to begin an expedition into the secret nooks and crannies of Lake Powell to research some unusual stone markings or carvings.

Victor Adams, hardware store owner and amateur anthropologist, has been pursuing strange carvings in Arizona, Utah, and Nevada deserts. For ten years he has been searching for the secret behind the glyphs.

According to Adams, the petroglyphs are unique in size and location. Adams states the symbols occur only along the so-called Arizona strip, a span of more than 2,000 square miles.

He proposes the symbols are markers, or coordinates, for an ancient overland map, possibly pointing to water sources or areas of shelter.

She glanced at the desk. Stephen was still talking to the couple, pointing to a map of Lake Powell. She continued reading.

The article contained six fuzzy photographs of glyphs. They were all similar, with minor variations. She studied them. They didn't resemble symbols in any Mesoamerican languages she knew, or anything in the International Phonetic Alphabet. She traced a facsimile of one of them on the coffee table, the sweat from her fingers leaving a clear outline on the glass. The physical act of drawing it didn't mean anything, either.

"Uh, Ms. Campbell?"

She jumped up, almost upsetting the coffee table in front of her. Stephen was standing there, brows pinched together. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to . . . Is everything all right? You seemed, well, upset, when you came in."

Mackenzie folded the newspaper under her arm and smiled. "Hi, Stephen. Everything's fine." She placed her hand on his forearm, and

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he stiffened slightly. She withdrew it. "I was just focused, I guess. Reading about the expedition. You know, the one where they're looking for those strange symbols carved in the rock?"

She took him for about twenty or twenty-one, the same age as most of her students. He shoved his hands in his pockets, and she felt her ears burning. Flirting with a young boy was new for her. God, she decided, I'm *so* not myself here. Her friend Hillary would approve.

His voice cracked. "Oh, yeah. I know the one you mean. There's a bunch of them staying at the Resort. I think it's kinda funny, though. Saying the carvings are a map for water holes or whatever. I think they're hiding something. It's gotta be gold mines or something."

Suddenly, she realized what the glyph reminded her of. A circle with a line through it. The reflection of a rainbow over water. Like Rainbow Bridge. Stephen may be right, she thought; the glyphs could be about gold.

"Ms. Campbell? You all right?"

"What? Oh, yes. Sorry. Just thinking."

"Well, like I was saying, they're hiding something. Either that, or they're on a wild goose chase."

Stephen's from around here, she thought. The rhythm of his speech and evenness of his vowels were distinctive. "I bet you're right. Interesting, don't you think? You seen any glyphs?" She slowed her speech, flattening her vowels and matching his inflection.

"Nah. Couple of people in town have seen them, but not me."

She smiled down at him. He was several inches shorter than her. "Know anything about the group looking for them?"

"Uh, not much. It was sort of short notice. Sulley's taking them out tomorrow."

She gasped. She couldn't help it. "Sulley? You mean Sullivan? Cosmo Sullivan? He's taking them out?"

"Well, him and Sam, his partner." Stephen stood still, like a cornered animal wavering between fight or flight.

She sighed. Sullivan again. Dammit. If only Stephen had told her about the trip earlier.

“They’re leading the trip?”

“Yeah. Him and Sam Two Banks run Canyon Outfitters.” He looked back at the desk, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“So they’re heading out in the morning? From the Wahweap Hotel?”

“Uh, yeah. I mean, no. It’s called the Lake Powell Resort. You really ought to talk to Sulley.” He sidled toward the desk.

“Oh, right. I will. Thanks.” She grinned, and instead of heading for her room, turned around to head back out.

Twenty minutes later, she stood in the luxurious lobby of the Lake Powell Resort. Mission-style armchairs and an overstuffed leather sofa formed a cozy conversation area in one corner. Thick slate gray carpet cushioned every step. Cactus and succulents contrasted with pale pink stucco, complementing the color scheme. She wondered how much rooms cost. The Holiday Inn was nice, but nothing like this.

She bounced along the springy carpet to the front desk and, smiling, asked the woman there for the amateur anthropologist, Victor Adams. Clerks were important, she thought, remembering Stephen. Good to get on their good side. This desk clerk, however, didn’t look quite so friendly.

“I’m sorry ma’am. Can’t give you his room number.” The woman behind the desk gazed at her with an unblinking stare.

Mackenzie froze, taking in the clerk, who had dark brown hair cut short. Choppy. Her shoulders were square and her back straight.

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Former military, maybe. With such a broad accent, she could be from Alabama or Georgia. The vowels in *ma'am* changed the word to *may-em*, and *can't* became *caint*. The cadence was slow and smooth. The clerk, whose name tag read "Rebecca," was at least six feet tall.

Mackenzie instinctively mimicked her. "Oh, tha's all right. I'll just call him on my cell." She started rummaging in her bag. "So how long you been away from Georgia?" A fifty-fifty chance: Alabama or Georgia.

Rebecca tilted her head. "How'd you know I'm from Georgia?"

"Oh," Mackenzie replied, "I'm a linguistics professor. A specialist in languages of all kinds. I can usually tell where someone's from within a hundred miles or so, 'specially if they're from the South. You grew up outside Atlanta? Small town?"

The clerk's eyes widened, and she bobbed her head. "Dang. I'm from Thomaston. Sixty miles south of 'lanta. Been away, uh, 'bout a year now." Her accent was much stronger now. She was relaxing. Mackenzie smiled back at her, still fumbling in the bag for her phone.

"An' how long you been in the military?" Mackenzie cut off her word endings and emphasized diphthongs. It would be tricky to sound similar and still retain her position as an expert.

"Uh, well, I was in ROTC in high school. I'm not in the army yet. Y'all can tell that by my accent, too?"

Mackenzie hesitated. She didn't want to explain her guess. "Yeah," she replied. "But that's not my best stuff. I really know Mesoamerican languages. You know, ancient Mayan and what-not."

Rebecca nodded slightly but looked confused.

"That's why I'm here. Suppos't to be on the team cataloging the ancient stone carvings. I'm their linguistics expert. Dang-it, I can't find my phone."

Rebecca scanned the lobby and held up a finger. "Hold on. I might could help you." Tapping a few keys on her keyboard, she whispered,

“Room 348. At the end. I’d call him first from one of them lobby phones, though. He’s been in and out all day.”

“Thanks. I’ll do that. Right nice of you.”

Victor Adams was in, and he was very accommodating. A tall, athletic man, he met her at the door with a broad smile. She guessed him to be about fifty. He didn’t look like an amateur anthropologist from Utah. He looked like an actor. She shook the hand he proffered.

“Hi, I’m Vic,” he said. “You’re interested in the expedition, are you?”

“Yes. I’m a linguistics professor at the University of Denver. My expertise is in Mesoamerican languages.”

“Ah, Mesoamerican languages. All of them?”

She shook her head, laughing. “No. There are at least forty separate languages and even more dialects. I focus primarily on Nahuatl, and other Uto-Aztec languages. A little bit of Mixtec and Zapotec. Pre-Columbian.”

He gestured toward a chair next to the window and parked himself across from her on the edge of the couch. They were in the sitting room of his two-room suite. Through the picture window she could see tiered hills of red and tan and brown above the gleaming blue water. Sounds of children yelling and splashing in the pool below rose over the gentle hum of the air conditioner.

“Quite a few languages, there. Do you know much about what I’m, or rather, we, are doing?”

“Not much. Just what I read in the newspaper,” she admitted. “I think I could be helpful, though. I’m on an extended vacation, and a bit at loose ends. Not used to this much leisure.” That much was the truth.

He grinned. “Yes, I know what you mean.”

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She cleared her throat. “I know you’re looking for specific glyphs, and I think it’s possible they’re tied to other petroglyphs or pictographs—ones that may link up to one of the languages I’m proficient in. I can get you my *c.v.* if you wish.”

He leaned forward. “Let me get this straight. You really want to join the expedition?”

She hesitated. If she appeared too eager, she might scare him off. “Well, as I mentioned, I’m on vacation. Alone.” She shrugged. “I was supposed to be with someone, but that, uh, fell through. Your trip sounded interesting, and I thought maybe it would be nice to explore the area with others. Especially others who had similar interests. I have all this time, you see, and I’m by myself. I’d just tag along. I wouldn’t expect to be compensated, and I could pay my way.”

“Hmmm. I don’t know. We’re being sponsored by the LW Foundation. They’re footing the bill for the entire trip.”

She forced herself to smile and tried to appear professional and competent. Her fears were threatening to take over. She wanted to go back, to grovel in front of Garrison. To sip wine with Hillary. At least then she knew what to expect. Here she was, on the verge of joining a group of strangers under false pretenses. In the desert, for God’s sake. Part of her wished Vic would say ‘no.’ But Charlie’s memory pushed its way into her head, and she knew she was doing the right thing. The brave thing.

He continued. “They’ve allowed me to build my own team. The chairman did mention he wanted to have someone who knows the Aztec language along. He seems to think the symbols are Aztec. I have my own theory, of course, but ... well, we’ll see. Do you understand that language?”

“Yes. Mr. Adams—”

“Vic, please. Call me Vic.”

“Okay. Vic, I’m also familiar with the symbology and languages of other cultures in that particular area.” A slight exaggeration.

“Ye-e-ss,” he said, cocking his head. “And another expert would lend more credibility to the expedition. Can’t have too many of them, right? Not that we need credibility.”

“No, but having more experts in more fields will provide more balanced findings.”

“Exactly. I’ve devoted eleven years of my own time to this project, and any publicity or tie-in would be invaluable.”

“Right,” she said.

“You know,” he continued, “much of the Lake Powell region is so isolated and difficult to get to that it hasn’t even been completely mapped. One of the few true wildernesses left, in the States, anyway. The Navajo Nation owns quite a bit of it around here, and they’ve resisted exploration. There are miles and miles of canyons, some almost as deep as the Grand Canyon, that no one outside of the tribe have even seen.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. I have to warn you. If you go, it’s not going to be an easy trip. We’ll be roughing it in the worst sense of the word. Once we get underway, we won’t have cell phone coverage or any means of communicating with the outside world. It’ll be strenuous. Camping and that sort of thing. Are you up for that?”

“Yes, of course. I spend much of my time doing field work.” An outright lie.

“Good. Anyway, I’ll have to talk to the Foundation. And our guide. It seems our group is already too large for him. He doesn’t approve of the way we’ve put it together.”

She smiled. “I promise I won’t be much trouble.” God, she was flirting again.

He grinned, flashing white teeth. “Well, we may be gone as long as a month. Do you think you could manage that much time?”

“Oh, yes. I’ll have my own gear, too, so no need to get any more. Is it a matter of money?”

J. Reed Rich

“No, money won’t be the issue. The Foundation seems to have deep pockets.”

“Is there another reason, then?”

“Well, it’s last-minute. For logistics. Food and such.”

She smiled. “I’m sure your supply company could handle it.” She paused, pretending to remember something. “Aren’t you using Canyon Outfitters?”

“Yes. You know them? A man named Sullivan. He’s the guide I mentioned.”

Striving to sound casual, she replied, “Yes, I know him. We just met for drinks, actually.”

“You did? Wonderful. I found Sullivan a bit uncommunicative and overbearing. But I guess that’s what we want in a guide. Right?” He winked at her. “Assuming the Foundation is agreeable, I’d be delighted to have you on board. What a wonderful coincidence. I’m sure since he knows you, Sullivan won’t mind the addition. Of course, I’ll have to check with him, too.”

She kept her face expressionless. She didn’t want to think about Sullivan’s reaction to her tagging along. If he said ‘no,’ it would destroy her plan. She shouldn’t have lost her temper with him.

Vic stood up and held out his hand again. “I’ll call them right away and let you know. You’re staying at the Holiday Inn? Fine. I’ll call you when I talk to the Foundation. Oh, before I forget. You’re aware we’re leaving tomorrow morning around seven, right? Can you be ready then?”

Mackenzie glanced at her watch. It was almost six o’clock. Less than ten hours to get everything done. Swallowing, she said, “Yes, of course. No problem.”

CHAPTER 5

IT WAS ALREADY SWELTERING THE NEXT MORNING WHEN Mackenzie drove from the Holiday Inn to Wahweap Marina. Vic met her at the entrance of the resort. The expedition was leaving soon; they had minutes to spare. Thankfully, she had only a small duffel, backpack, and sleeping bag.

Vic grabbed the duffel as they headed toward the end of the marina. “You made it. Great. I’m glad you’re joining us. As I said yesterday, the Foundation always wanted to have a language expert along. I figured our historian would have to do, but this is better. The Foundation actually encouraged me to include you.”

His blue eyes crinkled under thick eyebrows the color of almost-burnt toast. When he smiled, which was often she realized, fine laugh lines radiated from his eyes. His wide nose was slightly crooked and his chin too prominent. Although not quite handsome, he was magnetic and compelling. Arresting.

“Will someone from the Foundation be here, too?”

“Nope. We’re on our own, so to speak. Except for Sullivan, of course.”

“Yes, except for Sullivan. Did you tell him I’d be tagging along?”
Best to be prepared.

J. Reed Rich

“Uh, I wasn’t able to reach him last night. I left a message and, well, here you are.”

She didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure what Sullivan would say about having her on board. But Charlie was still out there, and this would help her find him. She had to try.

Near the end of the marina, houseboats rocked side by side, with barely five feet between them. From a distance they had seemed identical. Up close, they varied widely. Some had two levels with an observation deck on top. Some were basic, with one level and a deck on the roof. The larger, more elaborate ones boasted tinted windows and satellite dishes and spiral water slides.

Most of the boats had their windows closed. Mackenzie couldn’t see inside and was intrigued. She’d never been on a houseboat before.

Three men and a woman loitered at the end of the dock, surrounded by clumps of duffels and backpacks.

“So, Mike’s on the left,” Vic said. “He’s a Glen Canyon Ranger.”

A compact man in a khaki uniform leaned against a pole. Although his hat shaded much of his face, Mackenzie could make out his nose, which was wide and straight, and his lips, which were full. His hands were in his pockets, and under the short sleeves of his shirt she noted tanned arms with bulky muscles.

Vic grinned. “The Glen Canyon people insisted I have a ranger along, to keep us safe, I guess. The Lake’s under the jurisdiction of the Glen Canyon Park Service.”

“Is he Navajo? Does he speak the language?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s Navajo. Not sure if he speaks it, though. I know Sam does. His family’s been in this area forever.”

“Sam?” She remembered Stephen mentioning Sam Two Banks. “Is he here? In the group?”

“No. He’s with Sullivan. They’re supposed to pick us up.”

“Pick us up? Aren’t we going in one of these houseboats?”

“No, Sullivan has his own houseboat in some secret cove.”

Oh. A secret cove. Of course. Was he hiding? Or had he discovered his own little slice of heaven? She'd find out soon enough.

She turned her attention back to the group, feeling like a kindergartener walking into the classroom for the first time. God, she hated this. If only she could keep from blushing. Drawing a breath, she focused on what Vic was saying.

"Okay, Lucy's from the Museum. She's the only woman besides you. Don't know anything about her. She was the last to join us. Not what I expected a museum representative to be, but what do I know?"

Lucy looked like she was in her twenties and sported cropped, spiky white-blonde hair with dark roots. She wore a tank top and looked tanned and fit. Vic was right; she looked way too chic to be on a wilderness trip.

He continued. "Next to her is Sandy, an environmentalist from Boulder. The guy with longish brown hair. A bit hippy-dippy for me, but he came with good references." Sandy's chin rested on his knees, and he hunched over, withdrawing from the others. He'd probably be tall when he unfolded. Tall and skinny.

She'd never remember all this. "Right. Uh, and who's the older guy?"

The last member of the group was sitting with his back to them on a large suitcase, fanning himself with a newspaper. His bald head gleamed in the sun.

"That's Henry. Henry Whitehall. British and extremely connected. Been in the states for awhile, though. He's an archaeologist with the National Archaeological Society. Or at least he was. There was talk of his retiring, but I don't know if it happened."

"Wow," she said. "I think I've read one of his books. If he's along, you already have some credibility."

Vic's head bobbed. "I know. And now you're here. I'm excited."

He marched her straight into the middle of the group, and she fixed a smile on her face that she hoped looked genuine. Polite

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introductions followed. She walked over to Lucy, who was now sitting on the edge of the dock a few feet from Sandy. When Mackenzie sat down between them, Sandy jumped up, leaving the two women alone.

They chatted for a few moments about the lake and the upcoming trip. Lucy handled the heat well. Short hair was the way to go out here. Mackenzie's hair lay limp and frizzy, her neck was sticky, and her tank top clung to all the wrong places.

The women fell into a comfortable silence. Mackenzie's nose was slick from sunblock, and her sunglasses kept sliding down. Her freckles would double, she was sure. Already her sunburned shoulders stung, but she resisted changing her clothes. It was too hot to wear anything but a tank top. She would have to change into a long-sleeved shirt soon, though, to keep from frying.

Lucy told Mackenzie in a low voice that Vic had been contacted by the LW Foundation only ten days ago. They said they needed to use some grant money or they would lose it. So the Foundation offered to fund Vic's expedition to find and document the glyphs, all expenses paid. The catch was it had to begin in a week.

Vic, of course, was delighted. He had been trying for years to put an expedition together, but the finances had never worked out. He had had to scramble to assemble experts. And he had found them: historian, environmentalist, archaeologist, ranger.

Mackenzie pulled her knees up to her chest. "How did you get to be here, Lucy? Does Vic have ties to the museum?"

"No. Uh, the Foundation is one of the museum's largest donors. I had no choice. My bosses and the directors wanted someone to go. I view it as a vacation. I don't expect we'll find anything momentous."

"What do you do at the museum?"

Lucy rubbed her nose. "I'm in charge of research for museum exhibits and programs and other stuff. I recommend research projects." She coughed and clasped her knee, retying her shoe.

Mackenzie was about to ask for more details when a speed boat approached. Sullivan was at the wheel, and once again he docked the boat expertly. His mouth was set in a grim line, and her heart hopped despite herself. It wasn't looking good.

Vic helped tie down the boat. Once on the dock, Sullivan scanned the group. When he got to Mackenzie, his gaze lingered and he clenched his jaw. She stood a little straighter and stared back at him.

"So, she's joining the group?" He addressed Vic, but his eyes were on her. "You know five was my limit, right? My upper limit. And now we have six."

"I know, Sullivan. But the Foundation wanted her. They're paying you for your inconvenience."

"It's not an inconvenience, Adams, it's a matter of safety. Most of you don't know what the hell you're doing." He scanned the group. "How many of you have camped in the desert before? Besides you, Mike." He jerked his head at the ranger. Sandy and Vic raised their hands.

"And how many of you have been down a slot canyon?" This time, only Vic raised his hand. "Well, there you go. The rest of you are a liability. Especially you." He glared at her.

His words came out much too quickly. Had he practiced? Her jaw fell open. She was surprised by his intensity.

Vic started to reply, but she broke in first. Something about the guide brought out her defiant side. Not many people did that. "Why especially me?"

"Because you're inexperienced. Because you're too fair. You're high maintenance. And you're a pain in the ass."

She sucked in her breath, trying to think of something to say.

"I don't know how you manipulated your way into this group, Red, but I don't like it."

"I didn't manipulate my way in, *Cosmo*," she replied, narrowing her eyes. "I'm a fully qualified expert in Mesoamerican languages.

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I speak a dozen languages. As a professor of linguistics, I specialize in writing and language. I'm also familiar with different styles of petroglyphs and pictographs. Just because I haven't been down a slot canyon or whatever doesn't make me inexperienced. You don't even know me." She broke off before swearing. She didn't know the group well enough yet. "I am *not* high maintenance."

The rest of the group was silent, watching the exchange. Too bad she didn't have an ally among them.

"My name is Sul-ley," he said, pronouncing each syllable distinctly. "And I don't care how many languages you speak. This country is difficult, and it can bring out the worst in people. It's not like walking in a park or even hiking. Much of the land out here is uncharted, and when we get back into the canyons, I doubt we'll see another living soul. We'll be on our own, without a cell phone or GPS. Without a bathroom. No showers, no conveniences at all. Your true nature emerges when you travel through canyon country. It's going to require more of yourself than you could even imagine. I don't have time to babysit you."

"You won't have to babysit me, Mr. Sullivan." She refused to call him by his cliché of a nickname. "I'm more capable than you think. I can take care of myself." She picked up her duffel, planning on moving to the rear of the group. Instead, she caught her toe on a strap, tripped over a backpack, and nearly fell into the water. Lucy caught her arm just in time.

Sullivan folded his arms across his chest. "Right. You're so very capable, Red."

They clambered into the boat. Mackenzie concentrated on placing one foot after the other. High maintenance, huh? She would show him she was no princess.

MOKI STEPS

The speed boat was deceptively large, and the group fit with no problem, although they had to keep their bags in their laps. Vic, Lucy, and Mike braved the wind in the front, looking like hood ornaments, while she sat in the back on the bench seat with Henry and Sandy.

The motor and the relentless wind made it difficult to speak, which suited her. It was a bumpy ride. They sped through the wide channel, rising and falling with the waves, sometimes landing hard as they cut through someone's wake. Sullivan would occasionally point at side canyons and caves high on steep walls and comment. She couldn't make out a word. Most of the side canyons they passed were wide, but some were so narrow she doubted a speed boat, let alone a houseboat, could make it through them.

The sun and wind and scenery bleached out her anger. Sullivan had every right to be angry, she conceded. The trip had increased in size without his knowledge, and it was short notice. She knew he'd have to get more supplies and equipment. She bit her lip, wondering again what the hell she was doing. She was on her own with strangers in a dangerous place. She'd never done anything so impetuous before. She forced her shoulders down and breathed. She could do it; she could change. It was for Charlie. She'd show that idiot of a guide just how low maintenance she was, and she'd make herself indispensable. "Babysit me, my ass," she said aloud to the water.

They boated slowly down the main canyon for more than an hour, passing houseboats and speed boats. Jet skiers swerved around them from time to time, leaving long, thin wakes like tails in the water. Finally, Sullivan slowed, guiding them into a small side canyon. They drifted along to a low put-put. The smell of wet stone was strong, reminding her of rain on concrete. Up front, Mike, Lucy, and Vic were talking. Next to her, Henry and Sandy were busy snapping photos and didn't seem to want to converse. Fine with her.

J. Reed Rich

The canyon they turned into was at most fifty feet wide. Tremendous red and white walls flanked them. The water here was a deeper green than in the main channel and smoother.

They kept their speed low as they floated. After half an hour or so, they rounded a sharp corner to the left. The channel narrowed and the walls rose even higher. Several hundred yards later, two side canyons opened up on the right. Sullivan entered the larger one.

In this canyon, the walls were more white than red and smooth as glass. The waterway curved sinuously, and she was sure only a speedboat would be able to fit through such a narrow waterway. But when they rounded the next sharp bend, a sage-green houseboat materialized like a mirage, glistening in the distance.

“Yours?” Vic asked.

“Yeah. We’re going to pull up behind it. Think you can grab the rails and pull us in? Then put out the fenders.” Large rubber tires hung on the back of the houseboat.

“Sure.” Vic must have spent some time near boats. He tied their boat to the larger one quickly without thinking, pulling it up slightly to one side of the back deck.

The houseboat looked brand new. A full two-stories, it was top-heavy and immense. It was hard to believe it could float on the water.

Sullivan gestured toward the deck, and they climbed aboard on an aluminum ladder, single file. A large freezer and a barbecue grill were off to the left side in the shade of an awning. A spiral staircase on the right led to a smaller deck overhead, from which a water slide curved down to the water. At the top of the houseboat, above the second story, was the top deck. On it, a striped green-and-white canvas awning flapped a tattoo in the breeze.

They followed him around the perimeter walkway, passing tinted windows. Bedrooms, she assumed. On the front deck, three two-seater kayaks were stacked side by side.

How in the world were seven of them, including Sullivan, going to kayak when there were only three boats? Opening her mouth to ask, she thought better of it. She had enlarged the group and she was the reason they were short.

Sullivan told them to drop their luggage on the front deck. “Ready for the nickel tour?” Without waiting for a response, he led them through a sliding glass door.

She stopped at the door, and Lucy bumped into her. Apologizing, Mackenzie continued, stepping onto the dense brown carpet. A dining space and kitchen were separated from a lounging area by a large granite island. The three rooms were easily bigger than her entire apartment.

The interior was subtly elegant: The walls were paneled in rich oak, with built-in shelves and cabinets. In the front were two captains chairs, one with a steering wheel, panel of buttons, and digital screens.

She wasn’t sure what she thought a houseboat would be like, but this wasn’t it. “Definitely not what I expected,” she whispered to Lucy.

“Oh, I know. Now this is what I call living. Look at the kitchen.”

The kitchen sported two stainless steel refrigerators, a double oven, and a Jennaire grill. Another spiral staircase rose next to it, and she spotted a hallway beyond.

Mackenzie studied Sullivan as he pointed out amenities. The contrast was almost funny; in his tattered clothes he looked like the handyman, not the owner. But he spoke well, with an even, deep voice. She wondered how he’d been able to afford such a huge houseboat. Obviously, the guide business was doing very well. Either that, or he came from money.

They followed him through the hallway. Three bedrooms were on the right, with two sets of double bunk beds in each. Shelves and cabinets lined the left wall. They traipsed through the hallway out to the back deck, and Sullivan started up the stairs.

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The upper deck had a single stateroom the width of the houseboat. It was obviously his bedroom. He opened and shut the door, without commenting. On the other side of the deck, a hot tub bubbled away, next to a curving bar. A second grill and freezer were on this deck as well. The houseboat was a private penthouse floating in the middle of paradise. What would it be like to live here?

Sullivan strutted around the deck, proud of his boat. Lucy asked its name, and he replied, "*The Amoreena*."

"After the song?" Mackenzie blurted, without thinking. "The Elton John song?"

"Right. You know it?"

"Of course. It's one of my favorites. It was before Elton went pop. From the album *Tumbleweed Connection*."

"Never heard of it," Lucy said. Sullivan reached a tanned hand up to his jaw, rubbing the growth of two-day-old stubble. Golden-red in the light and shot with gray, his beard didn't match his hair. In the glint of the sunset she could see the hair on the back of his hand was blonder, with just a touch of red.

He regarded her for a moment and then motioned toward the set of stairs. Their conversation was over. He continued, "This boat has a fabulous sound system. We'll put music on for dinner." His tone was clipped, and he seemed irritated.

Dammit. She'd done it again. Why did she continue to call attention to herself? The song was an early romantic ballad about an unspoiled country girl. It just didn't seem to fit him. She took a deep breath. Keep your mouth shut, she told herself.

She led the way to the stairs, descended several steps, and screamed.

Standing just below her, a naked man was pulling on jeans. He grinned as he zipped up his fly. He was thin but muscular, and her eyes rested first on his chest, then on his flat abs, then drifted lower. She turned away. Somehow she couldn't move and felt herself

blushing. Above her, they were all speaking at once. She desperately wanted to head back up, but she was trapped.

“You must be Mackenzie,” Half-Naked man said. “I’m Sam, Sulley’s partner. Nice to meet you.” He looked about forty years old. Straight hair fell to his shoulders like a gleaming black waterfall. His eyes, framed with thick black lashes, were a surprising blue and shimmered with reflected light. He held out his hand and stepped forward. She stared at him like a startled rabbit. Smiling, he took her hand and covered it with both of his, leading her down the last two steps.

Just then Sullivan yanked open the sliding glass door behind them and burst into the room, breathing hard. She quickly retrieved her hand.

Sullivan let out a breath. “What the hell were you screaming at?”

Sam grabbed a shirt off the sofa before turning his back. She caught a flicker of a smile.

“And you,” he continued, turning to Sam. “Glad to know you made it, buddy.”

“Thought I’d tidy up a bit.” Sam smiled.

“So what’s all the ruckus about? Tell me.” Sullivan was red-faced, from the exertion. Or anger.

“I, well, he ... well, he was dressing,” she faltered. “I mean, he didn’t have pants on.” She was aware of hushed whispers above.

“You’ve never seen a man dressing before?”

“Of course I have,” she snapped. “But not here. In the wilderness. Or on the boat, I mean. I was surprised. I had no idea who he was. He could have been a robber, or worse.”

“Princess, out here, everybody’s a friend. Who did you think it would be in this canyon? We’re hell and gone from anywhere.”

“I don’t know, but I didn’t expect to meet a strange man dressing in your living room.”

“Salon.”

J. Reed Rich

“Whatever. You can’t blame me for being surprised by a naked man in your *salon*.”

Sam looked at her, eyebrows raised, and disappeared down the hallway.

She shifted from foot to foot. “I don’t mean strange. Well, hell, I do mean that. He was strange.”

Sullivan ignored her, crossing to the stairs. “It’s all right,” he called up to the group. “Nothing to worry about. Ms. Campbell just met Sam. Come on down.”

She stumbled backward, bumping into the table.

“Not high maintenance?” He walked past her, heading toward the hallway.

Several moments later, the group gathered around her, and she explained what had happened, omitting Sullivan’s comments. Laughter filled the small space, and she realized it *was* pretty funny.

“Tell me, were you surprised most by the man, or the fact that he was dressing?” Mike grinned at her.

“I think I would have watched,” Lucy said, with a throaty chuckle. “Nothing like that ever happens to me.”

“Yeah, quite the show,” Vic added.

She was pleased the group was accommodating. She still felt foolish, but it was wonderful to have some support. Her eyes filled with tears, and she blinked them back.

Sullivan returned carrying a hank of blue-and-white striped rope, with Sam behind him. “Okay, you all remember Sam, right?” He caught her eye, pausing a beat. “Sam’s my partner. You won’t find a better man anywhere.”

Sam nodded and then without smiling turned to Mackenzie. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Campbell. Again.” He offered her his hand. When she took it, he pulled her a bit closer. “I would have screamed, too, if I’d seen me.”

She laughed.

Sullivan coughed, a bit too loudly. “Sam, let’s tie up those kayaks. We need to get dinner started. How does salmon and asparagus with twice-baked potatoes sound?”

A few minutes later, Mackenzie flopped onto one of the sofas in the lounge, watching the two men through the window as they headed down the walkway toward the back of the boat. Sam had kayaked over, bringing extra kayaks and supplies. A splinter of guilt pierced her. Adding to the group might have affected them more than she realized. Ah, well. Too late now.

They waited on the deck for dinner. Apparently, Sam was king of the kitchen. After starting a couple pitchers of margaritas for the group, he grilled salmon and asparagus and pulled pre-stuffed, baked potatoes from the oven.

She rested on the railing, her back to the group. The houseboat was moored in a secluded nook with canyon walls on three sides. The clouds were crayon shades of yellows and oranges and reds. As the sunset deepened, the canyons became black silhouettes against the darkening sky.

She glanced over her shoulder. Sandy, the environmentalist from Colorado, was relating the history of Lake Powell; as he talked, it was obvious he thought the decision to create the lake was wrong. Loud and bombastic, with arms flying, he punctuated his sentences with sharp gestures.

“They shouldn’t have dammed the river. I know they say it creates electricity for the power plant, but for what? Inexperienced people trying to farm on land that wasn’t meant to be farmed. It shouldn’t, no can’t, be farmed.” He pounded one fist into his open palm. “Lake Powell was a mistake. Even the Sierra Club calls it a great big bathtub full of silt.”

Mike joined her during the monologue. He was still in his ranger uniform, although he had ditched the hat. They didn’t say anything for a few moments. They watched dusk deepen to nightfall.

J. Reed Rich

“You know, that group almost got the lake drained,” he said. He was younger than she had thought at first, and she had to lean closer to make out his words.

“What? The Sierra Club? Really?”

He nodded.

She angled herself toward him, considering. “Where do you stand on that? I mean, you’re Navajo, right? Isn’t a lot of your history under the lake?”

“Well, it’s complicated. Those prissy nature groups wanting to drain Lake Powell would destroy the Navajo Nation’s economy. Sandy’s not looking at the whole picture. The Navajo Generating Station provides more than electricity. It also provides 100 million bucks a year for the Nation. Jobs and security and such for the young. It’s good for them to be able to stay near their elders, to remember their past. To live on their own land. There’s nothing else on it.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, not responding.

“But, it’s not that simple. Violence and crime are rampant on the Res, and substance abuse is tearing the Nation apart, old and young alike.”

“Why does the Sierra Club want to drain the lake?”

“Oh, lots of reasons, and some of them good, I guess. The Club isn’t the only one. The dam destroyed the natural ecosystem of the river and canyons. You know, Sandy’s right: Lake Powell *is* a big bathtub of water. It’s an artificial reservoir, not a natural lake. But all bodies of water sit and collect silt and debris, natural or not.”

Mackenzie pulled her sweater around her. It was growing cooler. The group behind them had moved on to discussing bats. She cast a quick glance upward.

Mike took a sip of his margarita. “Sandy’s right on another level, too. It’s not meant for farm land. It wasn’t ever supposed to be. It was a tangle of canyons and slickrock, with a tiny river cutting through

it. Not so great for farming. Still, my heritage lies in those canyons, which are now beneath 500 feet of water.”

She glanced over at him, but it was too dark to see his face.

“More than half a million people visited Lake Powell last year. Before the lake, only a handful of people even knew about this area. That’s good and bad.”

“It’s confusing,” she agreed. “And complicated. I don’t understand it all.”

“We’ll never get that history back,” Mike said. “I know. I try not to take sides. Thing is, I like being close to my family. I could get a job at another National Park, but I’d have to move away.”

She mmped, not knowing what to say. He turned back toward the group, listening to Sandy.

Mike was intriguing. He spoke confidently, with a gentle assurance that belied his years. He had a strong profile and generous mouth. Muscular and trim, he didn’t carry an ounce of fat. She wondered why he still wore his uniform.

“Your family’s nearby?” She shivered.

“Most of them. And my fiancée’s. They’re here, too.”

“You’re getting married? Congratulations. When?”

“We haven’t set a date yet, but we’re thinking in the fall. An outdoor wedding with the canyons as a backdrop.”

“Wow. That would be fabulous. What’s your fiancée’s name?”

“Mary. Mary Louise Nasjah.” He lowered his voice. “She’s actually related to Sam. Everyone’s related to everyone here, in some way.” His words were jagged, like the serrated edge of a knife blade. She wondered what had caused the change.

Sam was tending the grill. He stacked roasted asparagus spears on a huge platter and piled salmon on another. With his hair back, he looked younger than she had estimated, maybe mid-thirties. The group, sensing food was imminent, gathered closer around the grill on the other side of the deck.

J. Reed Rich

“What’s Sam’s story?”

“Well, he’s half Navajo. His mother was a rancher’s daughter. Trying to get back at her family, I guess. She didn’t stick around long, took off after having Sam. He never knew her. Probably a good thing. But I wouldn’t mention all that if I were you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it.” She studied Sam, who was now arranging baked potatoes on another platter.

“Are you two close, Mike? I know he’s older than you.”

He snorted. “We’re not close. And not because of age.” He emptied his glass.

She didn’t reply. Life on the reservation was bound to be as political and difficult as anywhere else. She motioned to him with her empty glass. “Looks like we’ll be eating soon. Maybe we should go.”

They joined the group. Sam ate at the kitchen island, standing up. Sullivan was nowhere to be found.

An hour and a half later, the group was lounging in and around the hot tub. Party lights flickered above the bar, and the underwater lights cast a rippling green glow.

“Here’s to a new adventure,” Lucy toasted, and they all clinked glasses. She and Mackenzie were sitting in the hot tub, along with Vic and Sandy. Lucy was in a floral bikini two sizes too small that showed off her hard body; Mackenzie felt like a skinny prude in her high-cut one-piece. She stayed low in the water, with only her neck and head visible. Sam and Mike were behind the bar, talking to Sullivan. Dr. Whitehall, or Henry, as he had told her to call him, had retired early, complaining of a headache.

Sullivan leaned over the bar and cut the lights. The deck went dark, and more stars than she thought possible sparkled in the blackness.

Vic pointed out the Big Dipper and Cassiopeia, as well as a few constellations she hadn’t heard of. She pressed her back against the

jets, letting them pound out the tension. It had been a pleasant night, and she'd enjoyed herself. As the alcohol wore off, though, guilt tinged with fear moved in. She had a hidden agenda but still had no real plan. Not even a hint of one. The jets timed off, and she rested in the water, her chin above it.

Maybe things would become clearer at Rainbow Bridge. She had pushed the thought of the codex out of her mind. Finding something of that magnitude didn't happen anymore. It had to be a hoax. Charlie was the real reason she had traveled all these miles.

Sullivan clicked the lights on, and the stars faded.

Vic leaned in. "Are you all right, Mackenzie?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I was thinking about the lake. The glyphs."

"Oh?"

"Well, there's a good chance a lot of the glyphs are under the lake now, right? So if there is some organization to them, we might not be able to see it."

Sandy sat up a bit in the water. "Yeah. If we could figure out what they mean, it might help us find them."

She took her time answering. "I've been thinking about that. I have a theory."

Vic eased back into the water. "What are you thinking?"

"Well, it's a vague idea. I haven't seen all of the photos of the glyphs. Or any of them in person. How many have catalogued?"

"More than 200."

"They all look like a circle cut in half by a horizontal line?"

"Yeah. There are variations, though. Sometimes there are two concentric circles split by a line. Sometimes the line is longer, sometimes shorter. The position of the holes varies widely. Other than that, they all look pretty similar." He paused. "What's your theory?"

Lucy floated nearer. Mackenzie reached up, drawing a glyph with a wet finger on the deck.

J. Reed Rich

“Okay. I’m probably way off-base, but the glyphs look like a picture, an image, really, that I’ve seen.” She wasn’t sure she wanted to continue, but Sandy and Vic were both nodding. The group at the bar had wandered over, too, to see what was going on.

Clearing her throat, she said, “They remind me of, well, of something I saw recently. It looked like the glyph. It was a drawing of Rainbow Bridge, straight on, you know, where the bridge is reflected in the water. Like a complete circle, with the surface of the water a straight line in the middle.”

She drew it once more as she talked, emphasizing the water line. Vic glanced at her and then at the drawing. Lucy raised her eyebrows but remained silent. Sandy drew a glyph on the deck, too.

Vic puffed up his cheeks, then exhaled slowly. “You think the glyphs are of Rainbow Bridge?”

Mackenzie shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You could be on to something,” Sandy said.

“It could be the symbols were a map, like you thought, Vic.” She gazed at him. “But they could point to Rainbow Bridge. Maybe for a religious pilgrimage. Or maybe it was a known meeting point?”

He didn’t say anything. Mackenzie could tell he was running through the glyphs in his mind, checking for a variation to dispel the theory.

“Well, it’s something to think about. Maybe we’ll find something at Rainbow Bridge.”

“Or maybe you’ll find what you’re looking for,” Sullivan stood above them, like Paul Bunyan, arms folded across his chest. “Something that doesn’t have anything to do with glyphs, I’ll bet.”

“What? What do you mean?” She looked up at him, feeling ill. How could he know?

“I know you wanted to go to Rainbow Bridge,” Sullivan said. “In fact, you were desperate to go. Before you knew anything at all about this trip.”

The group looked at her. Nobody spoke.

“Yes, er, well, I did want to see Rainbow Bridge.”

Actually, she wanted to sink below the surface of the water.

“And that’s why you talked your way into this trip,” he said. “To see if you could get us to go to Rainbow Bridge. You don’t give a damn about the glyphs. I think you made it all up.”

“No!” Why did she raise her voice when around him? “I mean, no, I didn’t make it up. It does look like Rainbow Bridge to me. Doesn’t it look like it to you?”

Vic cut in. “Mackenzie didn’t plan this, Sulley. Her credentials are impeccable. The Foundation checked her out.”

She nodded. “I simply wanted to see it. A friend of mine told me about it.” It was the truth. The partial truth, anyway.

Sandy asked Sullivan, “How do you know she wanted to see the bridge?”

Sullivan gestured at her with his head. “She wanted to hire me to take her there. When I told her I was busy, she started yelling at me. In a restaurant.”

That was true, too. She didn’t know what to say, and she couldn’t tell them about Charlie yet. She’d tell them once they were underway. If she was still part of the group.

“Is Sulley right, Mackenzie?” Mike studied her.

“Yes and no,” she said. “I did try to hire him, and he did tell me he was busy. After he’d wasted a couple hours of my time. I learned of the trip myself. Later.” She knew she wasn’t making sense, but explaining the situation wouldn’t help her case.

“When did you hear about the trip?” Sullivan’s words were clipped, his jaw tight. “I didn’t tell you what it was about.”

Before she could reply, Sam said, “Hold on. Let’s sort this out. It’s getting too heated. Why don’t we all calm down. Okay, Mac, are you really interested in the glyphs?”

“Yes.”

J. Reed Rich

“And are you a linguistics expert?”

“I am. I have my doctorate in linguistics and specialize in Meso—”

He broke in. “So, you didn’t try to join the team for other reasons?”

She swallowed. It was the question she had hoped to avoid. There was no option. She had to lie. Again. Going on the trip was the only way to get anywhere near Charlie. She would explain later, she thought. They would understand.

“No other reasons. I just thought it would be a win-win situation. My vacation hadn’t worked out the way I’d wanted it to, so this trip sounded perfect. I’d have a guide, and be with a group of people, and I’d provide some linguistic insight. I’m interested in the glyphs. And I know I can add a lot to the team. I was curious about Rainbow Bridge, that’s all. That’s why I wanted to hire him.”

Mackenzie couldn’t see Sullivan’s face. That was probably good. She added, “I think it’s because I had Rainbow Bridge on my mind that I made the connection about the bridge and the glyphs.”

No one said anything, but silence was good, she thought. Silence meant they were thinking about what she had said. She could almost feel the group reassessing, believing her.

“I’m probably wrong,” she said. “It’s only an idea. I don’t claim it’s right.”

“But there’s a possibility,” Vic said.

And suddenly it was all right again.

Sullivan snorted but said nothing.

Good, she thought. Just stay out of it.