PROLOGUE
Summer, AD 1540

Three relentless warriors closed in fast. From the darkness behind him, a muffled grunt pierced the cool desert night. A swoosh of air, then searing pain slashed through his cheek. Aswani dropped to his knees as blood splattered the sands.

Heavy footfalls narrowed the distance.

Grabbing the obsidian-tipped spear, he forced himself back to his feet, spun, and hurled the weapon. As the warriors dove for cover, Aswani bolted.

The crescent moon hovered just above the horizon, barely illuminating the quartz trail markers. Chest heaving, Aswani paused, wiping warm blood off his face. He spied a marker next to a rock stack on the ridgetop—the trail veered right. Praying the Shadow Trackers would chase a phantom, he darted to the left.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the storm brewing over the mountains. A careless step smashed his toe against a protruding rock. Aswani stifled a scream. The throbbing pain forced him to stop, but it gave him an idea.

He crouched behind a boulder, listening for his pursuer. The Shadow Tracker crept up silently. Aswani's rushed swing missed the tracker's knee, but the heavy stone slammed down on the tracker's foot. The man's wail alerted the other warriors to his position, but Aswani had already disappeared into the night.

Lungs burning, tongue dried out, Aswani slipped off his heavy sling to reach his waterskin. A shout echoed from the darkness. Grunting, cursing, he upped his pace, drinking on

the run, water splashing everywhere. The stolen tablet nestled in the sling pounded against his spine.

Exhausted and bleeding, Aswani clawed his way up the arroyo's steep wall. He coughed as a gust of wind whipped dust into his face. Above, the storm clouds blotted out the stars. The scent of rain spurred him to climb faster.

Below, the trackers reached the far bank. Poised to jump, they heard the onslaught rushing down the canyon. They hesitated a moment too long. A roaring wall of mud and debris tore a rift between Aswani and his pursuers, drowning out their angry shouts.

Resuming his climb, Aswani groped for a handhold. His foot slipped. Thrusting a hand out blindly, he snagged a protruding root. As he dangled over nothingness, the bulky map pulled him toward the raging waters below. Blessedly, the root held as he swung back and forth, building up enough momentum to hoist a knee onto the ledge, then haul himself over the ridgetop. Ribs heaving, he collapsed into the mud.

With a deep sigh, he rolled to his knees and filled his waterskin from a puddle. As he pressed his headband against his cheek, lightning illuminated the abandoned homes of the Ancient Ones on the far rise. His father and his father's father had warned him never to go there, and he had always heeded their wisdom. Ghosts or no ghosts, the shelter would protect him as he waited out the storm.

Retrieving his waterskin, he secured the dark stone in its sling. The tablet mapped the path to a hidden sanctuary safeguarding the five tribes' sacred relics from the strange, pale men raiding from the south. It also mapped a path away from starvation for his family. He staggered toward the ruins, scanning the shadows for any yucca plants.

A low growl cut through the howling wind.

Aswani froze mid-step when a spike of lightning revealed a demon of a man. Bloodied, clothes shredded, the last Shadow Tracker crouched, muscles coiled. Aswani's hand crept toward his knife.

Thunder cracked. Both flinched. As the rumbling shook the ground beneath them, every nerve screamed at Aswani to flee. He tightened his grip and raised the blade.

The warrior lunged.

The knife slashed upward. He struck too late.

One massive hand clamped his throat; the other crushed his wrist. The knife slipped from Aswani's numb fingers. Growling through clenched teeth, the Shadow Tracker lifted Aswani off his feet and grabbed the sling. Vainly, Aswani lashed out, bashing the huge man's face and thrusting a knee into his chest. The tracker doubled in pain.

The sudden shift in weight pulled them both over the cliff edge. Flailing, Aswani fell through empty space. His body slammed against a jagged boulder, shattering the map, shattering his spine. The raging river buried them and their secret into the depths of the arroyo.

ONE
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22, 1994

Dr. Maximilian Gold's lungs burned with every breath. The stale, lifeless air in the hole he'd literally dug himself into refused to stir or provide any relief. The walls of his excavation unit radiated more heat than any paltry shade they offered.

Grunting, he rested against the rim of the meter-deep trench. The crisp aroma of wild sage wafting through the desert smelled a hell of a lot better than he did. Sweat poured down in rivulets as he raked a thumb across his dark eyebrows. Max kept fit, but the grueling demands of the trench were taking their toll. While stretching out a kink in his back, he flapped the front of his sweat-soaked shirt in a feeble attempt to cool off. He gulped down some water from his canteen, then eased back down.

If Derek hadn't screwed up once again, Max would be overseeing his site instead of actually digging. Tossing a lifelike rubber scorpion into Kris's unit wasn't one of Derek's best pranks. The poor girl had come unglued. Max had sent him packing for the day and had taken over excavating the square. Derek was an excellent archaeologist, but the kid needed to focus.

Max poked the tip of his trowel into the hard-packed dirt. Despite the barking from his forty-four-year-old knees, getting back into the trenches was a welcome break from his usual routine. The mystery of the hunt—the thrill of the unknown—always enhanced his excitement when he discovered any hidden treasure. Selecting his softest camel-hair brush, he gently swept more soil away from her vertebrae.

She was the fifth burial they'd found so far.

Judging by the skull sutures and joint development, Max estimated her age between twenty-five and thirty-five. With most of her skeleton now exposed, he could run her

measurements through his computer program to confirm his hypothesis. The length of her femur alone indicated she had been taller than any other woman of her time. Also, her bones were strong, well-fed. She hadn't just survived. She had thrived.

Although she had been lovingly buried and surrounded by grave goods, her death had been anything but peaceful. Ribs smashed, several fingers broken, every tooth missing. Her skull exhibited signs of severe blunt-force trauma. No evidence of healing meant that her numerous injuries occurred at or near the time of death. Only her right ulna showed regrowth—she'd broken her arm as a kid. Intrigued, he continued excavating, leaning in with silent focus. Recent advances in soil analysis could reveal what the person's last meal had been. As he scooped up some of the dark earth to put it into a plastic bag, something glinted below her ribs.

Eager to unearth the new surprise, he selected a wooden chopstick from his dig kit to minimize any damage to the object. Finding anything near the poor woman's abdomen was highly unusual. Little by little he brushed away the loose sediment, revealing more of the relic.

Max froze. His eyes darted toward the woman's skull, then back to the object.

It wasn't a relic. It was human. *What the hell was a modern amalgam-packed tooth doing in a five-thousand-year-old Archaic burial?* Clearing away as much dirt as possible yet leaving it *in situ*, Max examined the tooth, then studied her skull. Given the unique way in which the tooth had been broken, it matched perfectly into her left maxillary PM2 socket.

Max slumped against the wall of the unit, dropping his trowel as he rubbed his temples, growling, "Ah, shit."

#

The generator's motor drowned out the usual night sounds as a cauldron of bats flitted through the floodlights, swooping at insects drawn to the intense glow. On any normal day, by

the time the sadistic sun had finished baking the desert, the archaeological crew would've been at the motel laughing, guzzling beer, and soaking in the hot tub.

Today was anything but normal.

Dr. Gold and his crew clustered around the grave as the tall, gray-haired sheriff crouched down next to the pit.

Rubbing his weathered face as he examined the skeleton, Sheriff Wiggins asked, "Are you sure it was hers?" His voice gravel over rust.

"Positive," Dr. Gold replied. "It fits into her left maxillary PM2 socket."

"Huh?" the sheriff said, wiping the back of his neck with his bandana.

Max flashed an easy smile beneath his Clark Gable pencil 'stache and tapped his cheek. "Right here. Near the rear of her top row of teeth."

Groaning, the sheriff stood and asked his deputy. "Got enough photos?"

The officer nodded.

Wiggins, brushing the dirt off his hands, asked Max, "How long's she been there?"

"No more than twenty years or so."

"Why's that?" Wiggins asked.

"Everyone else we've found so far was buried here between four and five thousand years ago. No dentists back then, and it's precision work. I can get a more precise date once we get back to the lab."

The sheriff circled the grave, concentrating on the woman's busted skull. He nudged up his sweat-stained Stetson and grumbled, "Somebody went to a hell of a lot of effort to hide a body." He scanned the site, squinting against the floodlights. "Leave her be until I figure out

what to do. No need to have extra boots stomping through here and turning my county into a circus."

Max nodded in agreement.

The sheriff surveyed the site one last time. "For both our sakes, let's hope anyone else buried out here walked the earth long before Christ did." After they shook hands, Wiggins tugged on his hat brim before ambling off toward his Bronco.

As the sheriff drove away, Gold glanced down at the woman, pondering her story.

TWO

A man in his mid-fifties hummed while strolling down State Street, his polo shirt flapping in the breeze. The Windy City was living up to its name. His Topsiders, white pleated shorts, and Ray-Ban sunglasses completed the ensemble of a forgettable tourist.

Storm clouds loomed overhead, threatening another downpour. He wasn't too worried, though, since he was only a block away from shelter and a wonderful childhood indulgence. The happy thought put an extra kick in his step.

Cool air greeted him when he stepped inside, but the sight was disheartening. The old Woolworth's was a hollow shell of its former glory. As he descended the stairs, the bustling street sounds faded into the clanking of an exhaust fan and the hum of overtaxed fluorescent lighting. His smile faded as he passed the lunch counter. He longed for an icy Coke and a toasted ham and cheese—just like old times—but the biting scent of industrial cleaner erased the greasy, nostalgic perfection from his idyllic childhood memories.

He lifted the pay phone's receiver. A steady dial tone hummed against his ear. He closed his eyes. A deep breath in, then slowly out. He repeated the cycle to calm his mind. His mantra perched at the edge of his lips. At exactly 12:12, he dropped a quarter into the slot and punched in the number. On the third ring, the line connected. Silence from the other end. He started things off. "My dog barks some."

"One moment, please," a pleasant voice replied.

After a metallic click, the line went silent.

He waited.

A crackle of static preceded the polite voice. "You will be connected momentarily."

"Thank you."

Pushing his sunglasses to the top of his head, he pinched the bridge of his nose, then rubbed his brow.

Another hollow click, then a voice grumbled. "Explain."

"The disposal of the body was handled with—"

"Handled?"

"It's been eight years. The protocol was perfect."

A humorless chuckle emanated through the line. "And yet he got a permit to dig there." A sharp sigh preceded a prolonged silence. "Remind me that you have the level of professionalism I require."

"We're tracking down the individual who performed the operation for us. There was—"

"Forget him. Get a team in there now."

He gripped the receiver until his knuckles ached. "Yes, sir."