

Shadow of the Dead Skeleton

A Max Gold Adventure

PROLOGUE

Summer, 1540 A.D.

Three relentless warriors closed in fast. From a shadow at his back, a muffled grunt pierced the cool desert night. A swoosh of air then searing pain slashed through his cheek. Aswani fell to his knees as the spear's obsidian blade shattered against a rock. Blood painted the golden sands. He spun and chucked the broken spear back at them. They all dove for cover. Aswani took off running.

When the last sliver of the crescent moon dipped below the horizon, the milky-white quartz trail markers guiding his path vanished into darkness. Gasping for breath, Aswani spotted a rock stack on the ridge top, indicating the trail veered right. He swiped at the annoying blood dripping down his face and turned left, purposely abandoning the trail, hoping his pursuers would continue following it instead of him.

As lightning flashed, he stole a glance at the storm brewing over the mountains. He instantly regretted it, jamming his foot on a rock. He muffled a scream. The throbbing pain in his toe forced him to stop. The points of light dancing through his eyes blinded him to the real stars guiding him home. The shadow trackers closed the distance.

Lungs burning, tongue dried out, Aswani slipped off his sling to reach his waterskin. One of the warriors shouted. *Damn*. He'd been spotted. Grunting in frustration, he recklessly upped his pace. The stolen tablet pounded heavily against his back. Water splashed everywhere as he drank on the run.

He'd borrowed his wife's child-carrying sling to transport the hefty black stone that mapped the path to the secret chamber. As strange, pale men from the south, in pursuit of gold, raided and pillaged their way closer and closer to the

tribal lands, the high council decreed that all jewelry, sacred objects—everything—would be hidden away until the danger had passed.

Aswani paused for a moment, cocking his head this way and that, listening for his pursuers. He could still hear several footfalls, but they were definitely lagging farther and farther behind. Taking a moment to get his bearings, he took a long swig from his waterskin before resuming his trek.

By waiting until the closing ceremony to nab the map, Aswani knew it would be far too late for the council to create a new hiding place for the treasure trove. The cave would be well guarded, but he figured that in a few months' time the sentries would grow weary of their duty, and he could easily slip in and out. He was "Fox's Breath" after all.

Exhausted and bleeding, Aswani still managed to slowly claw his way up the arroyo's steep wall. It had been over an hour since he'd seen or heard from the warriors. A gust of wind kicked up some dust off the cliff, causing him to cough. He scanned the sky. The mountain storm had advanced much faster than he'd anticipated. Clouds blotted out the stars. The scent of rain heavy on the air and the roar of water rushing down the arroyo spurred him to climb faster. A seasonal monsoon was about to release its wrath. The mad torrent that began as a trickle high in the mountains would be a speeding juggernaut by the time it reached him. *Just a little farther.* A smug smile crested his face. Soon he would be out of danger with a raging river between himself and his pursuers.

In an instant Aswani was totally soaked. The pounding rains splashed mud into his face. He shook his head furiously. Little good that did. He lost his hair tie, and now both mud and sopping hair covered his eyes. He couldn't afford to let go with either hand, fearing an all-too-easy plummet into the raging waters below.

The heavy map kept dragging him down. His foot slipped. He dangled by his hands. Blindly groping for his next handhold, he found a protruding rock. Blessing the stone for being secure, Aswani hoisted a knee, then the rest of his aching body up and over top of the ridge. He let out a cry of joy.

After catching his breath, he pounded a hollow in the mud. As he waited for it to fill with rainwater, he examined his prize. He traced the tablet's carved glyphs with his fingertips. He knew their meaning, and he'd teach his son how to read

them. Given what he'd overheard, the treasure trove wouldn't be given back anytime soon, even after the pale ones had long departed.

As he filled his waterskin, lightning illuminated the abandoned homes of the Ancient Ones. Aswani had seen the ruins many times before during his travels, and he knew exactly where he was. Warned by his father and his father's father never to go there, he had heeded their wisdom and had stayed away. However, the crumbling houses would be a dry refuge under their large, protective ledge. Ghosts or no ghosts, he was going to shelter there to wait out the storm.

Groaning as if he were more ancient than any elder in his clan, Aswani slowly stood. He would endure the heavy burden on his back. The hunk of dark stone would guarantee his family and his tribe ate well for years to come. His cheek was tender to the touch and had nearly stopped bleeding. His throbbing foot was going to make the end of his journey agonizing, yet comfort was only a few minutes away.

As he hobbled towards the ruins, a low growl rolled through the storm. He froze mid-step. All the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. A flash of lightning revealed his worst nightmare. No more than a leap away, a massive cougar scrambled over the arroyo's rim.

He stilled his breath, mentally projected himself as merely a stone amongst stones. His hammering heart betrayed him. Thankfully, the wind carried his scent away.

Head drooping, ribs heaving, the cougar padded toward the overhang.

Another flash lit the sky.

The beast froze.

They locked eyes. Two statues in the storm.

Aswani's hand crept towards his knife.

The lion crouched, muscles coiled.

Aswani raised the blade.

A sudden clap of thunder scared them both.

Roaring, the beast stiffened, ears twitching.

The rumbling went on and on, vibrating the very ground beneath them.

Every nerve screamed at Aswani to flee. He tightened his grip.

The lion crouched, sniffing at the dirt, darting its head back and forth. In one mighty leap, the massive beast was face to face with Aswani.

He rolled and slashed upward. He struck too late.

The cougar barreled past him and kept running.

Surprised he wasn't dead, Aswani laughed. Half-mad with relief, he watched the lion vanish into the night. With a deep sigh, he rolled to his knees. His wounds would scar into a legendary campfire story. For now, he just wanted shelter.

While limping towards the ruins, a rumbling tremor shook him.

The earth beneath him disappeared.

The weight of the stone tablet toppled him backward. Flailing, he fell through empty space, tumbling end over end. His body slammed against a jagged boulder, smashing the map.

Plunging into the torrent below, the fast moving current dragged him under again and again. Wrenching free of the sling and its heavy burden, he kicked upward, gulping air as he surfaced. He clawed onto the bank, collapsed, and lay shivering.

The arroyo's steep cliff loomed above. Climbing seemed like an impossible task, but he would not abandon hope. The storm would pass and he would find his way home—and his way back to the secret chamber.

ONE

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22nd, 1994

George Roundhill could feel his brain melting. His 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 leaned heavily against the rim of the meter-deep hole. 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 the back of his thumb across each of his bushy eyebrows—a move his coworkers lovingly mocked, claiming it looked like two caterpillars peeing. While stretching out a kink in his back from hours of hunching over, George flapped the front of his sweat-soaked shirt in a feeble attempt to cool off.

He gulped down some water from his canteen. The summer of '94 was shaping up to be another scorcher across the southwest. Even though he grew up in nearby Roswell, he was never been a big fan of the desert. He chuckled softly at the cruel irony of chasing a profession that constantly tossed him into barren wastelands.

Never one to procrastinate, George used the break to update his paperwork. His fellow archaeologists ribbed him for his exacting work ethic, but he considered it a perfect quality for his job. Archaeology wasn't just about finding cool stuff. It was about documenting it accurately.

The team had been excavating on the site for a little over two months and had already discovered a treasure trove of fascinating artifacts. The Anasazi stuff was phenomenal, but after reaching the Archaic occupational layer, an outstanding assortment of unique grave goods and other rare artifacts kept popping up. George let his imagination run wild picturing what life was like out here over five thousand years ago.

Roundhill eased the tip of his trowel into the hard-packed dirt and carefully scraped away a minuscule amount of soil. *These things must be done delicately!*

Selecting his softest camel-haired brush, he gently swept the dirt away from her lower vertebrae.

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

Judging by the skull sutures and joint development, George estimated her age between twenty-five and thirty-five. He would have to wait until he fully exposed her skeleton to confirm his hypothesis, but the length of her femur already told him she was taller than most women of her time. Her bones were strong, well-fed. She hadn't just survived. She had thrived.

Although lovingly buried in the flexed position and surrounded by grave goods, her death had been anything but peaceful. Ribs smashed, several fingers broken, every tooth knocked out. Her skull exhibited severe blunt-force trauma. No signs 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 uncovering her ribs, leaning in with silent focus.

George's stomach unexpectedly growled. Hunger or an odd discomfort from digging around the area where her stomach would've been? Recent advances in soil analysis could reveal what the person's last meal had been. As Roundhill diligently scooped up some of the dark soil to put it into a plastic baggie, something glinted at him.

He selected a wooden chopstick from his dig kit to minimize any damage to the object. For him, the thrill of the unknown greatly enhanced his excitement when excavating sites. What mysterious treasure lay buried beneath? What new surprise awaited him? Finding any grave goods in the poor woman's abdomen was highly unusual. He gently swept away the loose dirt with his camel-haired brush, little by little revealing more of the object.

George froze. His mind racing. His eyes darted towards the woman's skull then back to the object. His heart pounded heavily in his chest. He blinked rapidly in disbelief at what he was seeing. George jumped up and yelled, "Dr. Gold!"

* * *

The generator's motor drowned out all of the usual desert night sounds as a cauldron of bats flitted through the floodlights, swooping at the 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 back at the motel laughing, guzzling beer, and soaking in the hot tub.

Today was anything but normal.

They clustered around the grave, eagerly watching Sheriff Wiggins as he crouched down in the excavation unit examining the skeleton. Tall and gray-haired, the sheriff appeared as though the desert itself had conjured him up from out of the Old West with his weathered face, faded jeans, and battered cowboy boots.

Wiggins wiped the back of his neck with his bandana. "Are you sure it was hers?" His voice was gravel over rust.

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

"Huh?" the sheriff said, studying the man standing on the rim of the pit. He'd seen Gold around town before, mostly at Peppers Grill, but this was the first time they'd actually met. The archaeologist had introduced himself as *Maximilian Gold*, and Wiggins noted the man's firm, dry handshake. Lean, muscled, and with a steady presence, Gold obviously did more than simply supervise his digs.

He'd seen *The Last Crusade* a while back and figured this guy might've taken a page from Indy's wardrobe. The gray at his temples and the lines around his eyes put him in his mid-forties. With a pencil 'stache like Clark Gable's famous look, Wiggins figured the man probably had women falling all over themselves.

"My apologies. Jargon of the trade," Max said with an easy smile. He tapped his cheek. "Right here. Near the back of her top row of teeth."

Groaning as he stepped up out of the excavation unit, Wiggins motioned to his deputy to hand over the evidence bag. The single tooth it contained looked ordinary. Hell, it could've been the same one he knocked out of a guy who had whacked him with a two-by-four. His left shoulder still ached from that event. "How long's she been there?"

Dr. Gold thought for a moment. "No more than twenty years or so."

"Why's that?" Wiggins asked.

"Everyone else we've discovered so far was buried here between four and five thousand years ago. This tooth has an amalgam filling, which first showed up in the United States around 1830. Given its precision, I'd date her dental work to the past ten to twenty years. Further analysis of her bones and the surrounding soil will give us a more precise date."

The sheriff circled around to get a better view of the woman's busted skull. While nudging up his sweat-stained Stetson, he grumbled, "Somebody went to a hell of a lot of trouble to hide a murder." He scanned the site, squinting against the floodlights. No telling how many more victims could be buried out here, and that'd take a lot of money to investigate. The county budget was already stretched tight. Perhaps Gold's university could help foot the bill. They were going to dig here anyway. "I'm gonna give Albuquerque a call and ask for a forensic team. Could take a day or two. They'll want to go through everything." He made a sweeping gesture with his leathery hand. "All through this area."

Gold bristled at the idea of anyone else working on his site, no matter how well trained they were. He stared into the sheriff's eyes, which were no more than slits from spending far too much time in the sun. "I have a suggestion for you, sheriff," Gold began. "How about posting the coroner or a deputy out here to monitor us while we continue excavating? Then, if we find anything relevant, we'll immediately stop and let your team take over."

Wiggins grinned inwardly. That's exactly what he wanted to hear. Chaves County folks kept electing him because he could read people quickly. He'd pegged Gold within minutes. Clean site. Honest, expressive face. Not the type to hide things.

"Yeah, that'll work," the sheriff muttered while rubbing his stubbled chin. He nodded toward the grave. "Leave her undisturbed until I figure out what to do."

"I'm good with it."

The sheriff handed the bagged tooth to his deputy, scanned the site one last time, then turned to Max. "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 Stetson before ambling off toward his Bronco.

Gold watched him go, pondering which of them was using the other. He glanced down at the woman, wondering who she was, and why someone had gone to so much trouble to hide her out here. She wasn't meant to be found. Yet, there she was, and the silence around her was loud with her unspoken plea. Max nodded, agreeing with her. "Yes, I will help you," he whispered. "Your story isn't over yet."

TWO

A man in his early fifties hummed contentedly, his polo shirt flapping in the breeze. The Windy City was living up to its name. As he strolled down State Street, his topsiders, white pleated shorts, and Ray-Ban sunglasses completed the ensemble of an unassuming everyman.

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

Cool air greeted him as he stepped inside, but the sight was disheartening. The old Woolworth's glory days were behind it. It had been years since his last visit, and now the store seemed a faded shadow of his idyllic childhood memories.

He inhaled deeply as he passed the lunch counter. Pavlov's dogs had nothing on him. The scent was exactly as he remembered with its greasy, nostalgic perfection. When he was done, he'd return for an icy Coke and a toasted ham and cheese, just like old times.

He lifted the pay phone's receiver and listened to the dial tone. He closed his eyes while inhaling and exhaling deeply, calming his mind. He despised his boss, and talking to the man set his teeth on edge. At exactly 12:12, he dropped a quarter into the slot and punched in the number. On the third ring, the line connected. No one on the other end said anything. He started things off by saying, "My dog barks some."

"One moment please," the pleasant voice on the other end replied.

There was a metallic click, and the line went silent.

He waited. The nature of his business often made him feel as though he actually was a character in a David Lynch film. Or perhaps he should take his cue from the "Moose and Squirrel" cartoons and slink around wearing a black trench coat and fedora. Nah, way too hot for that. Yet, it would be great to have a partner named Natasha.

The pleasant voice came back on the line. "You will be connected momentarily."

"Thank you."

There was a metallic click, and the phone went silent again.

He pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head and glanced at his reflection in the phone's polished metal. In truth, he didn't mind the graying so much, especially since he still had a full head of salt-and-pepper hair—a look women found dashing. What he didn't like was the skin starting to sag under his chin. His father was in his eighties and barely had a wattle, and he hoped his stayed small too. He was still fingering the skin under his chin when the line connected.

"How the hell did he get a permit to dig there?!" the angry voice asked.

Biting into his boss's anger never helped, as he'd found out the hard way, so he calmly replied, "Mr. Heart, it's been eight years since that situation was handled, and—"

"Handled?" Mr. Heart snapped. "*Handled?! I think your words could use a little more clarity, Mr. Stomach.*"

Calmly, he replied, "Sir, your predecessor considered the disposal of the body to be ingenious, and personally signed off on it. Perhaps, if most of his documents hadn't been—" how could he state his boss's bonehead move diplomatically? "*—removed* during the purge, we would still have the information at hand and could've put a halt to the excavation before it began."

Mr. Heart's voice came out low and cold. "Your insinuation has been noted."

THREE

Hanna Sundberg dropped the tailgate of the Ford F-150 and plopped her backpack onto its edge. She rummaged through a side pocket for her bottle of sunscreen. When she first arrived from Sweden a few years back, she'd been determined to get a tan. *Hah!* Boiled lobsters had nothing on her. Now she stuck to jeans and an oversized men's long-sleeve cotton shirt. It was comfortable and the baggy fit gave her better range of motion.

The delectable scent of coconut drifted around her as Hanna donned her sunglasses and slipped on her conical rice-paddy hat. Its broad brim would shield her delicate skin as she crouched down in her excavation unit for hours on end. Several crew members copied her iconic choice of headgear while a few others had opted for a sombrero to keep the blazing sun at bay. After stowing away her backpack, Hanna grabbed the transit set and headed off.

Max Gold studied the grid map he'd sketched the night before, extending the excavation area well beyond the murder site. The crew was ecstatic. Fresh squares meant fresh artifacts. Last year's phase two test pits had unearthed a wealth of Anasazi polychrome pottery, and the new area was potentially loaded with exciting goodies.

"Here you go, Dr. Gold," Hanna said as she handed him the transit.

"Thanks, Hanna."

With the grade rod in tow, Hanna walked out to the datum and waited as Max assembled the transit and focused its telescope. After jotting down the measurement, Gold gave her a thumbs-up. She measured out ten meters due east across the sandy ground, held the rod upright again, and adjusted it slightly until he signaled. Then she pounded a wooden stake into place.

They repeated the action for the next few hours at various points out across the desert as they established the corners for all the new excavation units. When they were done, bright pink string delineated each of the new meter-by-meter squares everyone would be hunkered into for the next few weeks. Rather than assigning specific units, Gold kept things lively by having everyone draw

numbers from his battered fedora. It gave each archaeologist an equal chance at unearthing something spectacular.

* * *

Despite the sweltering heat, laughter still carried on the wind. Even a cloud of gnats invading the site couldn't dampen the crew's spirits. They traded jokes and friendly challenges as their trowels bit into the golden sands, revealing tantalizing glimpses into the mysterious past.

As the sun kissed the horizon, Amy Donovan could hardly believe her luck as she pulled her compass out of her field kit. Choosing unit five had paid off. Nestled in the soil was a rare female pottery figurine. She selected her favorite mechanical pencil from the front pocket of her bib overalls and diligently recorded the artifact's position and orientation.

Clued in by the newbie's humming, Hanna glanced over at Amy's unit. She beamed as she wrapped an arm around her friend. "Holy shit! Way to go, Amy!"

Everyone gathered around Amy's excavation unit to "ooh" and "aah" over her fantastic discovery.

"Eh, I've seen better," Kris Mouton deadpanned, her cinnamon eyes dancing with mischief. Dressed in faded cargo pants and a hot-pink tee, she handed Amy the camera and photo log with a crooked grin.

"Everyone rub the newbie's head for luck!" Derek shouted.

Several rough hands knocked Amy's hat off and tousled her mousy-brown hair. Her lovely blue eyes sparkled as she relished the attention.

Gold smiled warmly at his crew while standing on an overlook surveying the day's progress. No new graves yet, but the odds were high. Paraphrasing the sheriff, if anyone else was buried out here, let's hope they were laid to rest long before five loaves of bread and a couple fish miraculously fed an entire multitude. He finished his field log entry by noting the arrival time of the security guard, then set off toward the trucks.

As pale blues faded crimson and long shadows stretched across the sands, no one noticed the binoculars trained on them as Max and his crew packed up their gear and headed out.

FOUR

The archaeological site was as quiet as a tomb now that the crowd had finally cleared out. Ralph chuckled at his own pun as he completed another lap around the dig site and checked off the last of the three a.m. paperwork. He was glad things were getting back to normal after all the excitement. Having the cops and everyone else hanging around for two days in a row had royally messed up his routine. Ralph lived for these cool, clear nights out in the middle of nowhere. Being far away from people helped to keep the buzzing in his brain to a minimum, too.

Everyone always had an opinion about what he did or, more to the point, what he wasn't doing with his life. Ralph was going to punch the next person who called him a slacker. He kicked at the ground, sending up a small dirt cloud. The desert was the perfect place to get away from it all. The animals out here didn't care what he did for a living as long as he didn't bother them. He did wear snake guards around his lower legs as he made his rounds, though. Rattlesnakes tend to get pissed off when you step on them, and he wasn't going through that again.

Grunting as he kneeled down to peek under the tarp, Ralph shone his flashlight on the skeleton. Having worked security at several other archaeological digs, he'd seen lots of human bones before. They were totally cool, and he tried to imagine what his own skeleton would look like. He'd always been fat, and he wondered if he actually was big-boned like his mom said.

After finishing his rounds, Ralph laid his flashlight and his nightstick on top of his '72 Nova. Reaching in through an open window, he retrieved his brown-bagged lunch and thermos from the passenger seat. He jumped up onto the car's front fender before sliding over to the middle of the hood. He didn't worry about the rivets on his blue jeans scratching the car's finish. There wasn't much paint left on it anyway. The sun had baked most of it off, and the desert sandstorms had blasted away what was left. Besides, he'd bought the car "pre-dented" as he liked to call it, so no need to worry about what his short, bulky butt was doing to the bodywork.

Ralph wiggled to a comfy spot and rested against the Nova's windshield. He pulled out his Walkman from a jacket pocket only far enough to press the play button before letting it slide back in. After switching off his flashlight, he donned his headphones and gazed up at the stars. He loved seeing the Milky Way without all the light pollution from the city. While rocking out to *Destroyer*, his favorite Kiss album, he peeled away the waxed paper from his multi-layered bologna, Swiss cheese, and mayonnaise Dagwood sandwich. He bit off a large chunk and munched away happily and slurped it all down with a cup of java. The hot, black coffee would work its delectable magic and keep him awake all night long.

As he lay there, relaxing and rocking out, he smirked, basking in life's simple pleasures. Let other people claw and fight their way to the top. Ambition was for morons. Ralph knew his limitations. He knew he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but he'd be happy as long as he could still pick up a hoe. He snorted at his pun.

His favorite song, "God of Thunder," was winding down, yet the vibrations continued. "What the hell?" he mumbled as he leaned up and took off his headphones. He glanced around but didn't see anything. Flicking on his flashlight as he slid off the hood, Ralph stood next to his car and did a three-sixty. Nothing.

The rumble vibrated up through his boots, coming from behind. He stepped around the Nova and aimed his light down the road. Something big was out there. Ralph reached back and picked up his nightstick before pointing his light down the road again.

Instantly he was blinded by two huge spotlights.

He raised a protective hand across his face and nervously backed up a couple steps. With his nightstick held at the ready, Ralph wasn't sure if he should just stand there and wait or take off running. As someone who took his job seriously, he decided to be the pro and reached into his Nova for the walkie-talkie. While staring at the lights, which were now only about fifty feet away, he was about to key the radio's mic when a man stepped directly in front of him. Startled, Ralph jumped and screamed.

The man stood there silently. Since the creepy dude was mostly silhouetted by the glaring lights, all Ralph could make out about him was that he was short, dressed in black, and wore a hat that was popular when his grandfather was a kid.

He considered shining his flashlight in the guy's face, but instantly thought better of it.

The mystery man pulled a briefcase out of thin air, or so it appeared to Ralph. He'd been concentrating on the guy's face too much to realize what the dude had in his hand. Without saying a word, the short man flipped the briefcase horizontally and smoothly popped open both latches. He slowly eased the case open.

This time Ralph did aim his flashlight towards the man, but his was mostly hidden behind the case. Ralph lowered his light to illuminate the contents. Inside were several neatly stacked bundles of hundred-dollar bills. At least fifty thousand by Ralph's estimation. Ten seconds later, the mystery man shut the case, snapped its latches, and marginally lowered it. While holding on to the handle, the man in black held the case out towards Ralph.

"Oh, wow, dude." Ralph stumbled back with his palms raised. He had a good idea of what those blinding lights were attached to, and there were probably several other guys backing up the man in black. Taking the cash was probably the smart move, but taking the money would mean he would never get any cushy night security jobs ever again. "I don't know," he said half-heartedly.

The mystery man lowered the case. Without changing his calm expression, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun and held it up where Ralph could clearly see what it was.

Ralph did a quick intake of air.

The short man in black alternated holding up the case and the gun a couple times.

Just because Ralph had no real ambition in life didn't mean he was slow.

Ralph's thermos toppled over and rolled down the Nova's hood before dropping to the ground, spilling the last of its contents. The briefcase rested comfortably on the torn passenger seat as Ralph zoomed away.

The man in the vintage Homburg hat chuckled and holstered his gun as he watched the receding taillights disappear in a billowing cloud of dust. Intimidation was a natural high he truly relished. He allowed himself an extra minute to savor the moment before returning to the task at hand. "Move 'em out!" Mr. Spleen shouted to the men behind him.

The Caterpillar D9 bulldozer effortlessly plowed through the archaeological site, cleaving the site apart with mechanical indifference. Mr. Spleen made sure the first plunge of the huge blade scooped out the woman's skeleton and all of the dirt around her. He could leave now, but it would send up so many red flags he might as well be a parade in Moscow. Gouging out the entire site benefited everyone. Normally, Mr. Kidney would be the one heading a cleanup operation, but he'd gone missing a few months ago and was presumed dead.

In the seven hours between Mr. Stomach's call and the arrival of The Organization's jet, Mr. Spleen had completed his mission in Geneva—much to everyone's surprise except him. He slept well on the flight out of Switzerland, yet the time difference was catching up to him. The Benzedrine inhaler did its work quickly, and he greatly enjoyed the euphoric effect of the drug. Mr. Spleen carefully monitored his stimulant intake, though. On a fast turnaround, overnight job such as this one, it would be far too easy and far too pleasurable to take more hits than he actually needed. Besides, he prided himself on his cognitive abilities, and he wanted to keep his wits long into retirement.

Speaking of the ol' gray matter, anyone with two brain cells to rub together would know exactly why he was out here, but pointing the finger at looters did put doubt in everyone's mind. Also, while reading through the information packet on the flight over, he realized the artifacts could make a fortune on the black market. Anything Anasazi was all the rage in the Far East right now.

When his plane landed in the States, his driver handed over a satchel crammed full of American currency and a short note. Money always warmed his cockles. The missive informed him that Ms. Lung, masquerading as a file clerk, had successfully removed a missing person's report out of the Fulton County Police Archives in Atlanta. The only hard copy of a report a mother had filed for her missing daughter now no longer existed. Ms. Lung had also been diligent in scrubbing any computer files as well.

While examining the woman's tooth, Mr. Spleen marveled at the chain of events such a single, insignificant thing had set into motion. He tossed the tooth into the truck containing the skeleton of a woman who now no longer existed. Soon, all evidence of her would be eradicated from the face of the Earth. He'd keep an eye out to make sure nothing else survived.

Mr. Spleen caught a glimpse of a skull from another burial tumbling through the air as the dirt, artifacts, and even more bones filled the dump trucks. He didn't know who this new person was, but none of the other bodies belonged to his corporation. The operational packet listed that The Organization had only one disposal out here. He allowed himself a moment to ponder the possibility that he could be doing a favor for some other killer.

A sharp metal twang drew Mr. Spleen's attention away from the dump truck. It took one of his men all of two seconds to cut through the lock on the storage shed. Several flashlights lit up the interior as the doors swung wide.

"Eureka!" Mr. Spleen shouted with glee as he approached the hut-sized container. Several artifacts lined the shelves with many more carefully wrapped in protective cases. Mr. Spleen's streak of good luck just kept on truckin'. He'd arrived in the nick of time. From the looks of it, the archaeologists were getting ready for another shipment back to the university. His men tossed all the shovels, shaker screens, and tents into a dump truck, and replaced the crap he didn't want with the artifacts they had discovered during their "excavation" of the site. After the Cat dumped a final load of dirt, he instructed the bulldozer to hoist the container into the bed of a dump truck.

Time to roll.

Unfortunately, the tractor trailer rig had broken down. Sand had clogged the air intake, and even after the dirt had been cleaned out, the semi still refused to start. There was no way to haul away the Cat, and now the rig blocked the way out for all the dump trucks. Mr. Spleen never hesitated. He ordered the bulldozer to get rid of the semi.

After replying with a salute off the brim of his soiled Bud baseball cap, the Cat driver revved up the dozer's engine. Choking diesel fumes perfumed the air as he lowered the huge blade to near ground level. He drove full tilt into the side of the semi, ramming it farther off the road than necessary just for fun. He loved crunching metal. Cackling, he shut down the Cat's engine and left the key in the ignition. The bulldozer, trailer, and semi represented a huge chunk of change, but he knew The Organization would be willing to compensate him for his loss. He waved goodbye to his rig as he jumped into one of the waiting dump trucks, and they all disappeared into the gloom of the night.