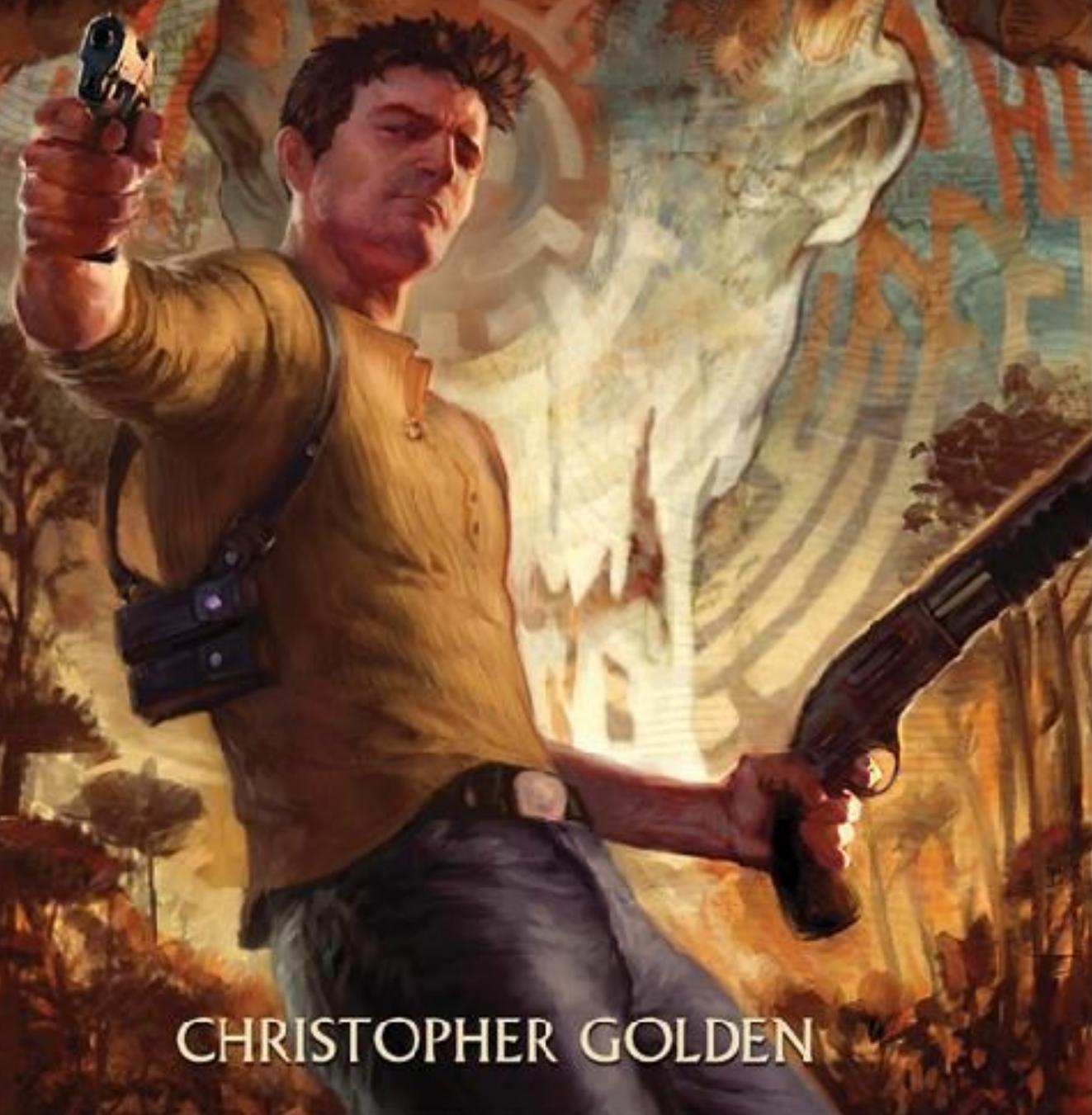


THE OFFICIAL NOVEL OF NAUGHTY DOG'S AWARD-WINNING  
VIDEOGAME FRANCHISE!

# UNCHARTED™

## THE FOURTH LABYRINTH



CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN

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**UNCHARTED**

**THE FOURTH  
LABYRINTH**

**CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN**



BALLANTINE BOOKS NEW YORK

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*Uncharted: The Fourth Labyrinth* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A Del Rey Trade Paperback Original

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eISBN: 978-0-345-52934-3

Cover design: Phil Balsman

Cover illustration: Jon Foster

[www.delreybooks.com](http://www.delreybooks.com)

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Tropical birds scattered as Drake veered the Jeep onto an old rutted track, snapping branches and tearing away vines, plowing through the rain forest with killers in pursuit, bullets flying, a gorgeous but pouty girl in the passenger's seat, and a bitch of a headache. With only one of his arms on the wheel, the Jeep slewed to the left, and the pouty girl screamed as he forced the vehicle back onto the trail just before they would have crashed into a felled tree.

Nathan Drake was beginning to hate the jungle.

He glanced in the rearview mirror an instant before a bullet shattered it, forcing him to risk glancing back over his shoulder. There were three vehicles in pursuit, a lumbering truck that had fallen to the rear and two Jeeps just like the one he was driving; which made sense considering that this one had been parked next to them when he'd stolen it.

The jungle had closed in around them, a wild tangle of rain forest the people of Ecuador called Oriente, which seemed to him a pretty ordinary-sounding name for a place full of things that could kill you—like brutal sons of bitches employed by pissed-off South American drug lords.

The rutted track he'd taken forced the three vehicles into single file; which was good since it meant only one carload of them could be shooting at him at any given time. Bullets tore at leaves and cracked branches, the Jeep juddered up and down, rattling his teeth, and Drake kept his head down.

"This is your idea of a rescue?" the girl shouted.

He glanced at her wide eyes and her pretty mouth and her soft skin the color of cinnamon and decided he didn't like cinnamon. It ruined a good piece of toast as far as he was concerned.

"What the hell makes you think this is a rescue?" he snapped.

She blanched a little at that, and then her eyes narrowed. "Maybe the fact that here you are, rescuing me."

Drake laughed, but then his smile vanished as he heard bullets plink into the metal rear of the Jeep. The spare tire bolted to the back blew, but that was a damn sight better than losing one of the tires he was actually using.

"Does this *look* like a rescue?" he asked. "You're along for the ride by accident, sweetheart."

In truth, it hadn't been entirely by accident. He'd infiltrated the rain forest compound where Ramón Valdez tended to hide out from the rest of the world, running his drug cartel from a place so remote that nobody wanted to go hunting for him there. *No one with half a brain*, Drake thought. That hadn't stopped him from tracking Valdez down twice in three years.

He didn't like jobs that involved outright theft, for reasons that were best explained by the situation unfolding around him that very moment. But in the case of Ramón Valdez, he'd made an exception because he had a prior claim on the item he'd been hired to steal. He'd stolen it once before.

The girl had been a wrinkle in his plan. He'd found her trussed up in Valdez's bedroom and had intended to leave her there until her efforts to free herself gave him the idea that maybe she wasn't a willing participant in her bondage. That had complicated matters significantly, because timing was vital to his plan. For a few seconds he had tried to persuade himself that he wouldn't regret leaving her there—that her struggle was some kind of playacting she'd rehearsed for Valdez's benefit—but as he had started to walk away, he'd known he was lying to himself. Drake knew a prisoner when he saw one.

“What were you doing there, anyway?” he asked, jerking the wheel to the right.

“Vacation,” she said bitterly in that aren’t-you-a-dumbass tone young women seemed to perfect so early. “What do you think?”

“Not really the question,” Drake said.

A burst of gunfire tore up the trees to his left; the last few bullets stitched the side of the Jeep and then blew out a taillight. A macaw exploded in midflight in a bullet-riddled burst of blood and feathers.

“Maybe you should focus on driving?” the girl asked, panic in her eyes as she ducked lower in her seat. “How can you be so calm?”

“Oh, this isn’t calm,” Drake said, twisting the wheel to veer around a felled tree. The Jeep rumbled over brush and roots and sideswiped a giant kapok tree. “This is me terrified. I can tell by the white knuckles and the way my jaw hurts from clenching.”

The girl glanced at his hands on the wheel. She must have noted the whiteness of his knuckles because she went a shade paler than before.

“You going to tell me who you are?” Drake demanded.

“My father really didn’t send you?” she asked.

Her disappointment softened him as much as a guy driving through the jungle pursued by people trying to kill him could be softened. He saw the split-trunk tree he’d been watching for, the only kind of landmark that could be expected out here, and cut the wheel to the left, crashing the Jeep through a curtain of hanging vines and onto a trail that had been trodden by hooves but rarely by tires. The Jeep bucked like crazy; it felt like it would shake apart in his hands, leaving him sitting on the driver’s seat and holding the steering wheel with no car around him.

“Sorry, kid. I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

She lifted her chin, trying too late to hide her withered hope. “My name is Alex Munoz. My father is mayor of Guayaquil. He’s been fighting a war against drugs in the city, and he can’t be bought.”

She said this proudly, and Drake didn’t blame her. For the mayor of a major South American city to take on the drug cartels, he had to be either courageous as hell or absolutely nuts. Alex didn’t have to tell him the rest of the story, either. Beautiful girl, no more than nineteen, bound and gagged in a drug lord’s bedroom? She had been a hostage, a negotiating tactic, and probably about to become the victim of something worse.

*How do I get into these things?* Drake thought.

But then, it wasn’t Alex Munoz’s fault that he was being shot at. Sure, untying her and getting her out of the compound had given him away and slowed him down, but it had been a risky plan to begin with, and in his experience risky plans almost always ended up in him being shot at—and sometimes actually shot.

“So if Papa didn’t send you, who are you?” Alex asked, her pouty look returning. “What are you going to do with me?”

Drake ignored the second question. If there was anything he’d learned over the years, it was that while running for his life with a woman at his side, it was best never to tell her you didn’t have a plan. “My name’s Drake. Nate Drake.”

If she got the James Bond reference in his delivery, she didn’t let on. “What is this?” Alex asked. “What did you do to make Valdez so angry?”

Drake gestured to the backseat. “See that?”

When Alex glanced into the back, Drake knew what she would see. The staff was wrapped in burlap kept tight by strips of duct tape. The burlap had come from the poppy farm on the other side of the compound from Valdez’s house. Drake had brought the duct tape himself. He’d managed to get the display case in Valdez’s study open without setting off any alarms, had bagged and tagged the staff

and had been making his exit when he glanced into the bedroom and saw the girl with the cinnamon skin. The rest was dumbass history.

---

“I see it,” Alex said.

“Have you heard of the Dawn Tavern?”

“Are you talking about a bar or Pacariqtambo? The place of origin? Or are you talking about the lost colony?”

“You know the story?” Drake said, glad he didn’t have to explain. Just the fact that they were having this conversation was absurd enough, but he figured it was better than her screaming at him not to let her die or him cursing himself out for coming down here in the first place.

“Of course,” Alex sniffed. “I go to university.”

*Great, Drake thought. The only brat in the jungle, and she’s in my Jeep.*

In Incan myth, Pacariqtambo was a cave from which the first people had emerged into the world. One of those brothers and sisters was a guy named Ayar Manco who carried a golden staff that was supposed to indicate where his people should build the first Incan city. Legend said that he’d changed his name and founded the city of Cuzco, that he and his sisters had built the first Incan homes with their bare hands. To many people in the region, the story was more history than legend, which meant that the discovery three years ago of the ruins of a lost colony—supposedly an offshoot of the original Incans, going all the way back to Ayar Manco—had stirred up a serious controversy. A local tribe whose people claimed to have known about the lost colony all along insisted that the ruins were the real and actual Pacariqtambo, that after being betrayed by his siblings, Ayar Manco had returned to the cave of his birth with his wife and children and founded this hidden village. The public argument about what was real and what was myth had been raging ever since.

“Three years ago, Valdez hired me to lead a team into Pacariqtambo and bring back whatever artifacts we could find. But what he really wanted was the golden staff of Ayar Manco. After I brought it to him, he decided he’d rather kill me than pay me. I barely got out of Ecuador with my life.”

Alex looked at him like he was crazy. “So you decided to steal it back?”

Drake laughed. “Are you nuts? Valdez eats guys like me for breakfast. No, I figured I was lucky to still be breathing. But the Cuiqawa—the tribe that made those claims about Ayar Manco? They figured they’re probably his closest descendants, so the staff should be theirs. They hired me to get it back.”

“And you took the job? After Valdez almost killed you?”

“A guy’s gotta work,” Drake said. “And hey, Valdez went back on a deal. That just doesn’t sit right. You know? I figured the least I could do was annoy him a little.”

They held on as the Jeep dropped into a streambed, splashed through, and roared up the other side. The guns had gone quiet, and Drake took a moment to hope Valdez’s goons had given up the chase. Then one of the pursuing Jeeps burst through the vines behind them, and he realized he should have known better. It was never that easy.

“Hey,” Drake said, glancing at Alex as he drove, a fresh burst of gunfire blasting the trees off to his left. “Do you think your father’s offering a reward for your safe return?”

She stared at him. “You said this wasn’t a rescue.”

“No,” Drake replied, “I don’t think I did. And anyway, it’s a moot point, isn’t it? I mean, once a guy’s actually done the rescuing—”

“You haven’t rescued me!” she shouted as a bullet shattered the rearview mirror on her side, showering her hair in shards of glass and metal.

“Well,” Drake said. “Not yet.”

He aimed the Jeep at a gap in the trees that looked too narrow, but they roared through with inches to spare on either side. Alex swore at him and covered her head, then looked up in blinking astonishment that they had not crashed even as Drake floored the gas pedal and the tires spun clods

damp earth into their wake. For a few seconds the clatter of gunfire ceased again, and as they passed through a strangely uniform alley of trees and vines, the hush of the rain forest embraced them, muffling their engine noise.

The Jeep hit a rise, then topped it, and the tires spun without traction for a heartbeat before touching down in a small clearing. Stiff-armed, Drake kept the wheel steady over the rough terrain, but they had run out of room. Thick brush bordered the clearing, and trees grew close and leaned together conspiratorially close. The only way out was the way Drake had driven in, and Valdez's gunmen were right behind them.

"Oh, my God, we're dead!" Alex cried.

Drake drove full tilt toward the far side of the clearing, the trees rushing toward them. At the last second, he cut the wheel to the right and hit the brake, causing the Jeep to fishtail and then shudder to a stop. The engine kicked and died, ticking with the heat of its exertion.

"Put your hands up," he said.

Alex glanced at him in confusion. "What?"

Drake threw his gun on the floor of the Jeep and climbed out, raising his arms in surrender. "If you don't want to get shot, put your damn hands up!"

The first of the pursuing vehicles roared into the clearing. Several shots rang out, but Drake started shouting out his surrender in both English and Spanish, lifting his hands higher to show he meant it. He stepped away from the Jeep as Alex finally put up her hands and slipped out, imitating him as best she could. She had started to cry.

Drake thought it was a bad idea to smile, but he had to struggle to keep a straight face. Fear did that to him. He figured Valdez had ordered his thugs to retrieve the girl and the staff of Ayar Manco, and it seemed pretty damn likely that he'd ordered them to kill the thief who had stolen both—which would be him—but he thought surrender would confuse them. Hoped it would, anyway.

The second carload of killers arrived in the clearing as the first came to a shuddering stop twenty feet away from him, their weapons trained on him and Alex. The big truck would be lumbering along somewhere behind. In one of those vehicles would be the guy in charge, some bastard smarter than the other bastards, and in their moment of confusion the killers would wait for him to make the call. Drake was surrendering, did that mean they should take him back to Valdez alive, or were they still supposed to shoot him?

While they were waiting, they climbed out of the two Jeeps, all of them shouting, spreading out in a circle around Drake and the crying girl, who didn't seem to understand that they would take her alive to preserve her value as a hostage. Or maybe that was why she was crying, Drake thought. Maybe being taken alive scared her more than dying.

*Or maybe you're just being melodramatic*, he thought. The killers gestured with the barrels of their guns, shouting in Spanish for Drake to get down on his knees. He complied, and Alex did, too, even though nobody had asked her. A short, slender, deadly-looking guy with a mustache that looked like it had been drawn on with a marker jumped down from the back of the second Jeep and walked toward Drake with his gun held down at his side like he was trying to sneak up on them, even though they were all watching him expectantly. This would be the guy, then. Drake waited for him to give the order to fire.

Stencil-mustache man didn't say a word, though. If his buddies were waiting for orders, they were going to have to keep waiting, because he was a hands-on kind of guy. He pulled a pistol from a armpit holster and strode over, lifted the gun, and pointed it at Drake's forehead.

"Any time now!" Drake called out, his voice shaking.

The little commandant frowned in surprise, apparently assuming that Drake was trying to rush him into pulling the trigger.

“What are you—” Alex began.

~~A single shot rang out, sending a flurry of colorful birds shooting skyward from the trees around the clearing. The little man with the ridiculous mustache staggered backward, glanced down in confusion and maybe a little regret at the hole in his chest, and then collapsed into the grass.~~

Only the fact that Drake and Alex had their hands thrust into the air and so obviously empty kept them alive in that moment. The baffled killers spun around, aiming into the trees, trying to figure out who they were supposed to shoot. One of them even fired a few rounds at nothing.

Then the shadows moved, branches swaying as dozens of guns and faces appeared in the trees. Some were above and some below, some were dressed in the style of local tribesmen and others in the plain garb of migrant workers, but they were all armed. There were guns as well as bows with arrows strung and even some knives ready to be thrown. Other than the cocking of the weapons and the rustle of the trees, they made no sound.

One of Valdez’s men started shouting at the others to fire, as if he needed to have someone else pull the trigger so he didn’t have to go first. An arrow thunked into the ground inches away from his mud-crusted left boot. He stared at the arrow for a second or two and then threw his gun into the grass.

A moment later, the rest of the killers started discarding their weapons and the Cuiqawa tribe swiftly emerged from the trees and surrounded them. Several of the tribesmen hurried to Drake’s stolen Jeep, and one of them lifted the burlap-wrapped staff from the backseat, shook it in triumph and nodded his thanks. Drake hoped the guy realized he hadn’t gone in after the staff just to win the tribe’s gratitude.

He stood and went over to Alex. The girl still looked terrified, staring at the Cuiqawa as though there might be a new threat. Drake helped her to her feet.

“How ’bout now?” he asked. “Does this count as a rescue?”

Drake spent most of the flight from Guayaquil to Chicago catching up on his sleep. After the adrenaline rush of days spent trying not to die, he felt completely spent, yet at the same time he was filled with a rare contentment. He'd set right a wrong Valdez had done him, restored a cultural artifact to its rightful owner—granted, he'd been the one to steal it in the first place—and now was going home with more real money in his pocket than he'd had in a long while.

The tribe had paid his fee for retrieving the golden staff, but the mayor of Guayaquil had paid even more for the pleasure of getting his daughter back alive. The fact that the latter deed had been purely if somewhat irritatingly, accidental only made the reward that much sweeter. It was the kind of luck that didn't come his way often, and he couldn't wait to share the story of his good fortune with Victor Sullivan, his best friend and sometime partner in ventures like this one.

There were several squalling children on the flight, and the sumo-size passenger in the seat behind him didn't seem very happy about Drake reclining his seat, but he felt impervious to the world's attempts to disrupt his contentment. With in-flight music quietly piped into his brain through the free headphones, he managed to sleep through the movie, waking up just long enough for the good chicken and broccoli dish that might have been dinner or maybe some kind of breakfast omelet if the congealed stuff around the chicken and veggies turned out to be egg.

The flight landed almost fifteen minutes early—just before ten o'clock in the morning—and when Drake unbuckled his seat belt and stood up, obviously content and well rested, he thought he caught several envious glances from other passengers. Most of them looked pale and weary, but he felt good as he retrieved his backpack from under the seat and his duffel from the overhead compartment. The sumo who'd been unhappy about his reclined seat was still trying to unwedge himself from 17D when Drake filed off the plane.

As he traveled from one terminal to another, he smelled cinnamon rolls, and his stomach rumbled. He had managed to keep down the hideous concoction the airline had fed its passengers, but he was definitely hungry again, and cinnamon rolls were one of his lifelong weaknesses. Like kryptonite—kryptonite was soft and warm and covered in sugar and Superman liked to eat it. *Or something*, he thought.

While waiting in line for his cinnamon roll and looking forward to American coffee, he reached into his pocket and took out his cell phone, which had been off for the duration of the flight. He turned it on and saw that he'd missed some calls during the flight and had some messages. The first one consisted of a woman's drunken rambling, and he decided it must be a wrong number. The second message was from Vivian, the woman who operated as his travel agent whenever he needed to make a journey that kept his movements off the grid. Drake did a little too much improvising for Vivian's taste and she often chided him for not using her services more often, but this call was to admonish him for flying from Ecuador to the USA using his own passport. He didn't like to do it, afraid to draw any scrutiny from Homeland Security, but he was just a guy visiting South America, not some jihadist taking flying lessons and then spending a few weeks training to blow himself up in some secret mountain stronghold in Afghanistan.

The third message was from Sully.

"Nate, it's me. Call me as soon as you get this. Something's up, and I could use a second set of

eyes. Another brain wouldn't hurt ei—"

The phone beeped, and he glanced at it, surprised to see that it was Sully calling again. He thumbed the button to switch over to the incoming call.

"Sully," he said, frowning. "What's so important?"

Motion out of the corner of his eye drew his attention, and he flinched, on edge after the last few days, but it was just the girl behind the counter handing him a bag that exuded the delightful aroma of cinnamon.

"You on U.S. soil, Nate?" Sully asked.

"I've got a layover in Chicago," Drake said as he made his way to a small table where he could sit with his back to the corner.

He could hear Sully pausing and thought he heard the man exhale. Smoking a cigar, Drake thought Sully quit about once a month and spent a lot of time chewing the end of an unlit Cuban, as if daring himself to light it. This morning, he had obviously needed a smoke.

"Chicago," Sully said, his gruff voice even raspier than usual. "How fast can you get to New York?"

Nate paused with the sticky cinnamon bun halfway to his mouth.

"What's in New York?"

He could hear Sully blow out another lungful of cigar smoke before answering.

"Murder."

Just after three-thirty in the afternoon, Drake sat in the back of a New York City taxicab, breathing in the smoke from the incense the cabbie had been burning and watching the green street signs go by on the way to Grand Central Station. He could have taken a shuttle bus directly from JFK International Airport in Queens to Grand Central in the heart of Manhattan, but Sully's urgency had been clear, and for once Drake was flush with cash.

He wished only that Sully had been more forthcoming over the phone. Drake had spent his whole life learning how to roll with the punches, and a big part of that had been Sully's tendency to spring things on him at the last minute. But he didn't think Sully's reluctance to go into detail had anything to do with the aging treasure hunter's usual games. Just before Sully had rushed off the phone, Drake had heard a woman crying in the background. If his old friend and mentor didn't want to talk about murder, he figured it was because someone else in the room was grieving. Sully would never be accused of being the sensitive type, but neither was he heartless.

A grieving friend also would explain why Sully hadn't come to the airport to meet him when his plane landed. If he needed Drake for backup for some reason, normally Sully would have wanted to brief him as soon as possible. Instead, he had just asked Drake to meet him under the clock on the main concourse of Grand Central Station.

The cab dropped him off in front of a restaurant called Pershing Square that was practically hidden beneath the elevated Park Avenue Viaduct. Drake paid the cabbie but barely looked at the man, his thoughts running ahead of him. He'd been lucky enough to catch a flight from Chicago within half an hour of talking to Sully on the phone, and throughout the nearly two and a half hours in the air and the duration of the cab ride, he had mostly been able to let his mind drift or focus on other things. But now that he had arrived, he couldn't help being worried.

Victor Sullivan had practically raised him from his early teens and taught him everything—nearly everything—he knew about staying alive in the "hard-to-find-acquisitions" business. They'd been all over the world hunting for treasure and antiquities for pretty much anyone who could afford to pay the tab. And in all that time he had never heard Sully sound as grim and weary as he had on the phone.

A taxi driver laid on the horn as Drake hustled across the street. A chilly October wind blasted him and he shivered, wishing he had a coat. He had left his bags in a locker at JFK, figuring he would be headed back to the airport on his way out of the city, but nothing in there would have helped. Ecuador had been warm and humid. Drake had spent too much time in hot and sticky locales in his life, so he didn't mind the chilly autumn wind, but it was a rapid shift, like stepping through a door to the other end of the world.

*Wouldn't that make my life easy?* he thought. But of course that kind of stuff happened only in science fiction and fantasy stories, where the heroes were all noble and death wasn't always forever. Real life had less convenient rules.

Drake hauled open the heavy glass-and-brass door and walked up the pebbled incline between the outer and inner doors. A man with a long, filthy, matted beard and sunken eyes stood to one side wearing a sign announcing the arrival of the End Times, but there was no way to tell if he was celebrating or regretting the moment.

When he stepped into the main concourse—the enormous, ornate chamber that came immediately to mind when he thought of Grand Central Terminal—he made a beeline for the huge clock. He spotted Sully standing beneath it, but the older man was turned away, watching the stairs across the terminal, probably thinking about the baby carriage scene in De Palma's *Untouchables*, a homage to the Russian flick *Battleship Potemkin*. They'd passed through Grand Central together a few times, and every time Sully had to tell him about those stairs. Sully saw him coming and perked up, shaking off whatever he'd been thinking about. From the haunted look in his eyes, Drake decided maybe it was old gangster movies, after all.

"Nate," Sully said. "Thanks for coming."

"I was already traveling. Just had to take a detour," Drake replied. Their rapport mostly consisted of banter, but for once he thought maybe the lighthearted approach wasn't appropriate. "What's going on, Sully? You said 'murder.' One look at you and I'm guessing this isn't some cozy mystery."

Sully frowned, smoothing his gray mustache. "I'm not my usual jovial self, huh? I guess not. But you look more than a little like crap yourself, so maybe you shouldn't judge."

Drake raised his eyebrows. "Great to see you, too."

A tired smile touched Sully's face and a bit of the usual mischievous twinkle lit his eyes, but then the smile faded and his gaze turned dark. He nodded his head toward the row of arched doorways that led through into the train tunnels and platforms.

"Come on. This way," he said.

Drake followed without asking any more questions. If Sully had a particular way he wanted the answer to unfold, Drake would indulge him. He'd earned that, and far more, in the years they'd been friends. He studied Sully as they reached a staircase and started down to a lower level. A drinker and an inveterate ladies' man, he looked, as always, as if he would have been more at home gambling in 1950s Havana than dealing with twenty-first-century America. His graying hair looked a bit unruly and dark circles under his eyes implied he hadn't gotten a lot of sleep the night before. He wore a brown leather bomber jacket over one of his guayaberas—linen shirts that were most popular in Latin America and the Caribbean. Both the shirt and the khaki pants he was wearing were rumpled, indicating that whatever sleep he had gotten, he'd been wearing the same clothes since the day before.

It had been almost two months since Drake had seen Sully, but they'd spoken on the phone less than a week ago, and at the time there'd been no indication that anything was amiss. But murder gave no warning.

Sully led him through the lower-level concourse and past the arched entrances to a warren of underground railway tunnels until at last he turned through one of those archways and walked down a dozen steps to a train platform. Lights flickered unreliably in the darkness of the ceiling above them.

The rumble of trains both near and distant made it feel like at any moment the world might shatter itself apart. The noise reminded Drake of counting the seconds between thunder strikes as a child trying to figure out how far away the storm might be and if the lightning might be coming his way.

No train awaited them at the platform. Drake had half expected that they were about to embark on a journey, but if they were, it apparently wouldn't be by train. The tracks were empty, and other than themselves, the platform looked abandoned—except for the yellow line of police tape that had been used to cordon off the end of the platform from the public. Drake didn't have to ask; he knew where they were headed now.

Two platforms over, a train clanked and hissed, waiting as a few stragglers hurried alongside it. The conductor stood outside the door, ushering them along. The man glanced at Drake and Sully. Once upon a time he would have minded his own business—New York had been that kind of town—but after 9/11 all that had changed. Sully knew it, too, because he stopped at the crime scene tape, making no move to go beyond it. They were suspicious enough just being down here without any obvious reason. Drake thought maybe the conductor would think they were plainclothes detectives, but then he realized they were probably underdressed for that. And if he had caught a glimpse of the guayabera under Sully's bomber jacket, the man would know right off the bat they weren't cops. Most police kept their quirks on the inside.

Standing by the police tape, Sully withdrew a cigar from inside his jacket pocket. He wasn't much for rules, but he didn't light it, just stuck it between his lips and rolled it around in his teeth for a minute, thinking. Drake had never known him to be a man prone to rumination.

"You're starting to freak me out a little, Sully. How about you start by telling me who died?"

Sully stared at a spot beyond the police tape for a moment longer, then took the cigar from his mouth and turned to Drake.

"This platform's been closed since last night. A train came in from Connecticut—plenty of stops along the way—and when it left, there was an old steamer trunk on the platform. Mostly people were getting on, leaving the city, but there were some arriving, too. One of the conductors remembered the trunk and that two men were sitting near it. He assumed they had carried it on but didn't look too closely at them. Dark coats; that's all he remembers."

Sully shook his head, eyes narrowed in frustration. "Think about that, Nate. Anything in the world could have been in that trunk. The whole thing could have been full of Semtex or something. Can you imagine explosives in that kind of volume detonating under the city? We're so obsessed with planes but nobody's paying attention to ..."

He trailed off, taking a breath. He looked more angry than grieving, but Drake knew Sully well enough to see that he was both.

"So, this trunk *wasn't* filled with explosives?" Drake ventured.

Sully shot him a hard look. "I was making a point. But no, it wasn't. Place reacted like it could've been, though. Hundreds of trains were prevented from coming in, thousands of people evacuated. Transportation Authority brought in counterterrorism agents, and NYPD had a bomb squad down here. Bomb-sniffing dogs didn't get a read on it, but they were still treating it like it was going to explode. A couple of the guys who wrangle those dogs—one of them used to train them to sniff for corpses, and he knows the smell pretty well. He said he thought there was a body in the trunk. Turned out he was right."

Drake put a hand on his shoulder, hating to see his friend in pain. "Sully—"

"It was Luka," Sully said, his jaw working, eyes flashing with anger. "But not all of him, Nate. No arms and no legs. Just his torso. They'd cut his head off, too, but at least that was in the trunk. Whoever killed him, they didn't amputate his limbs to make it harder to ID him or they wouldn't have put his—"

Sully faltered. Sneering, he jammed the cigar back into his mouth and stared again at the arched entrance beyond the yellow tape. The train two platforms away pulled out, clanking loudly, and Drake wondered if the conductor was still watching them. He wondered why the cops or the FBI weren't on top of them already, wondering what they were doing there. If the trunk had been filled with explosives instead of Sully's dead friend, they would never have been able to come down here without being stopped. But murder didn't get the same attention.

In his life, Luka Hruzjak had been an archaeologist, a college professor, and a collector of antiquities. He had also been one of Victor Sullivan's oldest and dearest friends, a man who saw the modern understanding of history as just as much a mystery as the unfolding of tomorrow. Luka was known for pissing off his colleagues and employers because he refused to settle for the currently accepted versions of historical episodes, particularly from ancient times. In recent years he had established himself as a successful author of controversial histories written in language accessible to the general public. Drake had met Luka perhaps a dozen times and had liked him a great deal. He could picture the man's mischievous face and the way he'd always stroked his goatee like some cartoon devil. Luka had never condemned Sully for the work he and Drake did, mostly because he thought the most significant evidence available to challenge historians' version of the past came from tomb raiders and treasure hunters.

"I'm sorry, Sully," Drake said. "Something like that—it shouldn't happen to anyone, never mind someone like Luka. Have the cops turned up anything?"

Drake didn't bother asking where Sully had gotten his information about the discovery of the body. It seemed clear he had a source in the NYPD, which really came as no surprise. Sully seemed to have a drinking buddy or a gambling compadre just about everywhere. Six years past, they had spent a few rainy weeks in Bhutan searching for ancient demon and animal masks. The first day, they had gone to the marketplace to find something to keep the rain off them, and a man selling goat cheese and wine had clapped Sully on the back and hugged him like a long-lost brother. When the guy had stepped back, Drake had seen the wary suspicion in the merchant's eyes. He and Sully were friends, but they didn't trust each other. That seemed to be a common dynamic, and it extended from Bhutan to the United States to Easter Island. Drake trusted Sully, at least most days, but one of the first things the man had taught him was that a certain amount of mistrust was healthy and would keep him alive.

But Sully's NYPD contact hadn't been much help.

"They've got squat," Sully said.

Drake frowned, turning to look up at the flickering lights. "Seriously? It's Grand Central. They've got to have cameras everywhere."

"'Course they do. Doesn't mean they all work. When the budget's tight, choices have to be made. Some things fall by the wayside," Sully said, turning to look at him again. "But we've got something the cops don't."

"What's that?"

The look in Sully's eyes was a mixture of pain and pride. "We have Jada."

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Drake and Sully took the subway train that shuttled passengers between Grand Central and Times Square, then boarded another subway car, this one headed north. They sat quietly together, Sully warily watching other passengers. The lights flickered on and off, making strange scars out of the scratches some vandals had put on the windows. The seat beneath Drake had been sliced open, but that didn't bother him as much as the smell that permeated the air, trace aromas of sweat and urine, like the ghost of someone else's stink. The car rattled on the tracks, rocking back and forth in a lulling motion that might have put Drake to sleep on a day without murder in it.

Sully glanced around, more paranoid than Drake had ever seen him.

"What's going on, Sully?" Drake said, voice low. He glanced around to see if anyone was paying attention to them, his friend's paranoia contagious. But it was the New York subway; as a rule, people tended to pretend they were the only ones on the train. "How come you've got Jada hidden away?"

"It wasn't my idea," Sully muttered, glancing sharply at Drake. "She won't talk to the cops 'cause she's afraid of ending up just as dead as her father."

"She knows who did it?" Drake asked, intrigued.

"No. But she might know why. Now shut your trap. We'll be there soon enough."

Drake didn't argue. He could see Luka's murder had Sully spooked. If he wanted to be overcautious because he feared Jada might also be in danger, Drake wouldn't blame him. Sully was the girl's godfather, and he took the role seriously. With Luka dead, he would do whatever he had to in order to make sure the girl was taken care of.

Though she wasn't really a girl anymore, was she? The last time Drake had seen Jadranka Hzuja she had been eleven or twelve years old. In the intervening years, he had been vaguely aware that the girl had been growing up, but it had been happening so far off his radar that it was difficult to imagine Jada as an adult. Five or six years ago, he and Sully had gotten together with Luka and had dinner in a little dive in Soho that looked like it hadn't changed in decades. Over dinner, Luka had mentioned that Jada had been enjoying college, which meant she had to be in her mid-twenties now. But he couldn't shake the image of the little girl she'd been out of his mind.

As the train pulled into the 79th Street station, Sully tapped Drake on the knee and got up, slipping through the standing passengers. Drake followed, smiling as he made his way around a prodigious pregnant young woman.

On the platform, Sully leaned up against the side of a newsstand and waited for the train to close its doors and pull away. Drake thought he was being overly cautious, but he had altered his travel plans and come to New York and been in motion since he had gotten off the plane at JFK. A couple of minutes just standing still was welcome. Besides, he knew this game. Sully wanted to wait for the platform to clear to make it more difficult for anyone who might be trying to follow them to remain inconspicuous.

When the disgorged passengers had scattered and the train was gone, Sully fell into step beside Drake and the two of them went up the stairs in silence. Outside, the chilly autumn breeze swept along the sidewalk and the afternoon shadows had grown longer. Sully turned uptown, and Drake waited patiently until they were half a block from the subway station entrance before speaking again.

"Come on, Sully," Drake said. "Patience is a virtue, but it's never been one of mine. You dragged

me halfway across the country—”

“You were in Chicago. That’s not even close to halfway.”

Drake frowned. “I was never good at fractions. And that’s not the point. Luka is dead, and from the way you’re acting, it’s obvious you think whoever killed him isn’t going to stop there. If you’re going to drag me into a situation where I might end up in a trunk with some of my pieces missing, I’d at least like to know what I’m getting myself into.”

Sully shot him a hard look. “So would I.”

He let out a long breath, relenting, and glanced around to make sure no one was paying them any extra attention, then shoved his hands in his pockets and kept his gaze forward, talking quietly.

“Here’s the lowdown,” Sully began. “Maybe you remember that Jada’s mother died when she was a kid.”

“Breast cancer, wasn’t it?” Drake asked.

“Lungs,” Sully corrected. “Luka remarried a couple of years back, a woman named Olivia. Jada called her the ‘wicked stepmother.’ Olivia Hruzjak works for a company called Phoenix Innovation. The CEO is a guy called Tyr Henriksen—Norwegian, I think. Phoenix is mainly a weapons manufacturer with business partners around the world, but they have a research division that keeps things pretty hush-hush.”

“Why does the name ring a bell?” Drake asked, wary as a car slowed in his peripheral vision. It turned out to be a taxi letting off a passenger, but Sully had him jumping at shadows. “Tyr Henriksen isn’t the corporation.”

“Thought you’d catch that,” Sully replied. “Henriksen’s an antiquities collector, and he doesn’t mind acquiring things in a shady fashion if the aboveboard approach doesn’t work.”

“He’ll hire smugglers and thieves if he has to,” Drake clarified.

Sully arched an eyebrow. “I know. Can you imagine? Rogues and villains.”

Drake said nothing. Sully was joking, but Drake didn’t think it was funny. He bent the rules and sometimes he broke them, and his line of work put him into contact with some pretty unsavory characters, but he didn’t consider himself one of them.

“Three months ago, Henriksen reached out to Luka through Olivia, trying to get him involved in a private project,” Sully went on. “Luka had a bad feeling about Henriksen’s proposal, I guess. He did some poking, started doing the research Henriksen wanted, and stumbled across something that worried him enough that he quit. Only he didn’t *really* quit. He kept working on the project, but for himself instead of for Tyr Henriksen.”

“This is all pretty vague.”

They’d walked a couple of blocks and now came to a stop at the corner of 81st Street and Broadway, waiting for the light to change. There was a Starbucks at the southeast corner of the intersection and Drake found himself craving coffee, but he kept his focus on Sully and the people around them. A young professional woman, he guessed Indian or Pakistani, walked a tiny mincing dog. Two men crossed at the light, carrying Starbucks cups and laughing together. Drake didn’t see any threat, but he felt it, though he figured that was mostly the picture the day had painted thus far.

“At first, all Luka would tell Jada was that Henriksen had wanted him to solve a mystery for her and that there was treasure at the heart of it. Something priceless,” Sully said. “Something—”

“Worth killing for,” Drake finished.

“Looks that way, doesn’t it?” Sully asked.

The light changed, and they continued north along Broadway.

“So Luka wanted the treasure for himself,” Drake said.

“It doesn’t feel right to me. Luka wouldn’t have put himself on the line like that. He loved his work and he loved his daughter, and I always had the impression he was content with that.”

“No offense, Sully, but you saw Luka once every couple of years. People change. And even if Luka didn’t change, you can’t climb inside someone’s head and see the world the way they see it.”—

But Sully was shaking his head. “No way. I knew him as well as I know you. And Jada’s with me. She says her dad wasn’t excited the way someone who thought they were going to get their hands on something special would be. She says her old man just seemed afraid. When she pressed him about it, he told her Henriksen’s project was dangerous and the only way to stop him was to find the treasure before he did.”

They turned on 82nd Street. An old man passed them, his long wool coat too large for his aged, shrunken frame, and Sully waited until they were a dozen paces beyond him before he paused and faced Drake.

“Look, Nate, here’s what it comes down to. Luka—he was one of the good guys. I want to make sure whoever killed him pays the price. Beyond that, Jada wants to finish this project. It cost her father his life, and she intends to see it through for him. I plan to be a part of that. I’m not as young as I used to be, and she’s not used to people trying to kill her, so we could use your help. If you end up in a shallow grave somewhere, at least you’ll know you went out doing something good.”

Drake arched an eyebrow, unable to hide his wry smile. “Well, when you put it that way, how could I resist?”

Sully clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks. It means a lot.”

“Don’t get all mushy, Sully. You’ll make me blush.”

Sully rolled his eyes and turned away, cutting diagonally across the street toward a five-story building that took up half the block, which consisted of a row of apartment houses. Drake waited for a messenger on an old moped to buzz past and then followed. The Upper West Side of Manhattan seemed like a nice place to live, with trees planted along the sidewalk and waist-high wrought-iron gates in front of short pathways that led to front doors. The apartment building had red doors, dormer windows on either end and a little chalet-style peak in the center. Sully went all the way to the last door at the end of the block, where 82nd Street met West End Avenue.

Drake followed him into the foyer. Sully hit a button labeled Gorinsky, and they were buzzed in immediately.

Their destination turned out to be an apartment on the fourth floor at the rear of the building. According to Sully, it belonged to an old college friend of Jada’s who was studying overseas and had left her a key and an invitation to use the place any time she was in the city. If there was an elevator, Drake didn’t see it, and he was impressed by how little difficulty Sully had with the stairs. Not that he expected his old friend to collapse halfway up, but Sully wasn’t getting any younger, and smoking cigars wasn’t exactly the athlete’s number one hobby.

The apartment door opened before they reached it. The woman who stood just across the threshold could have passed for a teenager at first glance. She wore a long-sleeved cream-colored top, tight black pants, and plain black boots, useful instead of trendy. Her hair was black, but the long bangs that framed her face had been dyed a vivid magenta. But with a second look, Drake saw the power in her five-foot-three frame and the intelligence glinting in her hazel eyes.

Jada Hruzjak was definitely not a kid anymore.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sully asked quietly, hustling her back into the apartment. “You didn’t even ask who it was before you buzzed us in.”

Jada lifted her chin, ready for a fight. “I’m not stupid, Uncle Vic. There’s a camera in the foyer, remember? I watched for you.”

She jerked a thumb at the intercom panel by the door. Drake couldn’t see it from out in the hall, but he figured Sully was getting a look at a screen where someone in the apartment could see who was buzzing from down below and feeling pretty sheepish. That made Drake smile. He didn’t get to see

Sully put in his place very often.

Then Jada looked at him. “Are you just gonna stand in the hallway, smiling like an idiot, or are you coming in?”

“I wasn’t sure myself for a minute,” Drake replied, “but I guess I’m coming in.”

Jada stood back to let him enter, then shut and locked the door behind him. Drake glanced at Sully.

“Cat got your tongue, ‘Uncle Vic’?”

“Shut up,” Sully snarled.

The apartment was neat to the point of being spartan, decorated in bland colors by someone without a lot of imagination. The few pieces of art on the walls all seemed to have been chosen to match the decor instead of the other way around. The only signs of habitation were the throw pillows in disarray on the sofa and the mess of papers and books on the floor and coffee table nearby.

“Jada, you may not remember Nate—” Sully began.

“I remember him just fine,” Jada said, tucking a magenta lock behind her ear as she regarded Drake coolly. “Though in my memory you’re taller.”

Drake smiled. “Well, to be fair, you were shorter back then.”

“You were cuter, too.”

His smile vanished. “So were you. In a bossy ten-year-old girl kinda way.”

“I was twelve.”

“I know.”

Jada laughed, then immediately sobered, as if she felt guilty for feeling any levity at all in a world where her father had been brutally murdered. She managed a small, melancholy smile, just the slightest acknowledgment that she’d enjoyed the sparring, and then turned back to Sully.

“I kept working while you were out,” she said. “I wanted to have something to show you when you got back.”

Sully followed her over to the sofa and sat on the edge as she started to arrange the papers on the coffee table, then lifted a few of them off the floor. From where he stood, Drake saw that many of the papers were drawings of what looked like mazes, but they were fully rendered illustrations, not the crude puzzle maker’s doodling.

“How much did you tell him?” Jada asked Sully.

“Just about Henriksen, and Luka being afraid. I didn’t get into any of the historical stuff,” Sully replied.

“‘He’ is standing right here,” Drake said, then looked from Jada to Sully. “And I thought she didn’t know what this mysterious project was.”

“‘She’ knew a little and is trying to figure out the rest,” Jada said, cocking her head and studying him. “What do you know about alchemy?”

Drake shrugged. “What’s to know? Crazy people thought they could turn random other metals into gold. And how cool would that be? Although treasure hunters would be out of work.”

Jada picked up an old book, its dust jacket yellowed and torn at the edges. He could barely make out the title, *Science, Magic & Society*.

“You don’t look like the homework type,” she said. “But if you want to read up, it might not be a bad idea. There were a lot of men through the ages—almost always men—who presented themselves as alchemists and claimed to be able to make gold. They claimed all kinds of other things, too. Simeon Germain told all of Europe he was immortal. Fulcanelli had a reputation as a sorcerer. Nicholas Flamel supposedly unlocked the secrets of the philosopher’s stone.”

Drake picked up the book and flipped a few pages. “Actually, my favorite was always Ostanes the Persian. You know, the guy who was with Xerxes during the invasion of Greece? Apparently he introduced the black arts into the Hellenic world? Quite a rascal, that one.”

Jada gave him an appreciative nod.

~~“The crack about homework?” she said. “I take it back.”~~

Drake sat on the sofa, attentive as a schoolboy.

“Don’t be impressed,” Sully sniffed. “You can’t be in the business of acquiring antiquities without knowing the major alchemists.”

“I collect all the trading cards,” Drake put in.

Sully shot him a withering glance. Drake wondered if it was meant to stop him from making jokes or from flirting. Not that he meant anything by the flirting. It was a nervous habit he’d developed when he was around women who intrigued him, and Jada definitely intrigued him. Stunning, smart, and fierce, she still managed to have a sense of mischief that he admired. However, Sully was obviously protective of her, and Drake had no intention of testing that.

“I’ve been taking notes, trying to make sense of the things I remember my father saying in the past few weeks,” Jada explained, gesturing to the papers. “Uncle Vic and I went to the library this morning after he called you, and I tried to find the books I remembered my dad was so fascinated by late in the summer. A couple of them I couldn’t find, but I tried to get things that seemed the most similar.”

“What interests me the most is what I *didn’t* find,” she went on, turning to Drake. “One of the last things I remember my father saying about all of this was that he’d found some connection between a lot of what he called ‘the great alchemists’ and King Midas.”

“Not much of a stretch,” Sully said. “Midas was supposed to be able to turn things to gold just by touching them.”

Drake leaned forward, reaching for one of the maze drawings. “Maybe I missed something, but last time I checked, Midas was just a myth.”

Jada nodded. “Maybe. But my father always said that every legend has at least a little history at its core.”

“What are all these?” Drake asked, holding up the maze drawing.

She took it from his hand. “My dad had been doing tons of research, but his inquiries were spread pretty evenly on two subjects. The first was alchemy. The other one was labyrinths.”

“What’s the connection?” Drake asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Sully said, sifting through the illustrations. “Jada dug up references this morning on some of the more famous labyrinths.”

“Sketching helps me think,” Jada said. “Most of the ancient labyrinths only exist as ruins and foundations, but archaeologists think they’ve got some of them figured out. There are diagrams. I tried drawing them, trying to find design connections, that kind of thing.”

“Any luck?” Drake asked.

Jada’s expression turned contemplative. “A little,” she said, reaching for a larger book from the coffee table. “But the biggest piece of luck was right in front of me from the second we found the book in the library, and it took me until about twenty minutes ago to realize it.”

She tapped the cover, drawing their attention to the author’s name: Maynard P. Cheney.

“You know him?” Sully asked.

“No,” Jada said. “But my father had been talking to the guy constantly in the last few weeks. Cheney is working on a new exhibit for the Museum of Natural History. Want to guess the subject?”

Drake held up the labyrinth illustration in his hand and raised his eyebrows.

“Exactly,” Jada said, nodding.

“The museum’s only a few blocks from here,” Sully said as he stood.

“Let’s go have a talk with Mr. Cheney,” Drake replied, setting the illustration aside.

Jada rose, and they both turned to look at her. She seemed confused for a moment, and then her eyes flashed with anger.

“Oh, hell no,” she said, glancing back and forth between them. “My father is dead, and this might help us figure out why. If you want some girl who’s going to lock the door and hide behind the sofa, then you’ve got the wrong damsel in distress.”

Sully looked like he might argue, the thought of Jada in danger making him go pale, but one look from her and he didn’t put up an argument. Drake liked her more and more.

As Jada opened the door and led the way into the hall, he glanced at Sully. “I guess she’s coming along.”

Sully gave a wan smile. “You want to try to stop her?”

Drake followed Jada out the door. “Not in the least.”

As they walked down 81st Street, Drake hung back a ways, keeping an eye on Sully and Jada but also keenly aware of their surroundings. He checked every pedestrian and every vehicle but saw no sign that they were being followed. On the way uptown, he had considered Sully’s paranoia excessive, but now he wasn’t so sure. They had only the edges of the puzzle surrounding Luka’s murder, but if he had made some huge discovery involving alchemy, that likely meant gold. Maybe a lot of gold. And there were a great many people who would do just about anything for such treasure. He scanned the windows and rooftops but realized that it had become his turn to be overly paranoid. Even if Luka had killers—and logic suggested there was more than one, considering how much effort it required to sneak a steamer trunk with a corpse inside it onto a train platform without anyone noticing—had they found out where Jada had been hiding, they could not have predicted which route Drake and Sully and Jada would take when leaving the apartment.

Still, he was worried. As they walked, he turned the whole thing over in his mind. Luka’s wife had made the introductions between her husband and her employer. Drake wasn’t sure what her position was at Phoenix Innovations, but it stood to reason that she knew at least some of the details of the secret project Henriksen wanted Luka to work on. When Luka turned him down and started working on it himself, that would have put Olivia in a difficult position. Would she have told Henriksen what her husband was up to?

Jada referred to Olivia as her “wicked stepmother.” It might be a family joke, but Drake doubted it. The question was whether Olivia Hzujak valued her job more than she did her marriage. And if she had told Henriksen what Luka had been up to, would this billionaire CEO have gone so far as to have the man murdered?

Drake didn’t know. But someone had killed Luka, and to do it in such an odd and gruesome fashion—well, the killers hadn’t tried to hide their work. On the contrary, they had virtually assured that the whole world would know of it. By now, details of the discovery of Luka’s body would be on every news channel and all over the Internet.

Something didn’t click there. If Henriksen had wanted Luka dead, would he have made such a spectacle of the crime? It seemed far too great a risk for a man with so much to lose.

Ruminating on it, he picked up his pace as Sully and Jada passed the museum on the right and reached the corner of Central Park West. They looked comfortable together, like father and daughter. Sully spent most of his time focusing on his own fortunes, so it was fascinating to watch him become so wrapped up in someone else’s. He had no children of his own, but Jada was his goddaughter, and it was pretty clear he would do anything to protect her. Even if Drake hadn’t wanted to help Jada—which he did both for her own sake and because the puzzle intrigued him—he would have been on the board just because Sully had asked.

It was the one thing that Drake and Jada had in common. As of this morning, Sully was the closest thing either one of them had to family. Drake hustled up the museum steps and through the door

finding Sully and Jada waiting for him just inside.

“Anything?” Sully asked.

“Not that I saw,” Drake replied, “but I’m no detective, so what do I know?”

Sully frowned. “Nah. If they knew where Jada was, they’d have tailed us from the apartment.”

Jada looked relieved as Sully headed off toward the information desk. For a person who had learned of her father’s murder only half a day before, she was holding together well.

By the time they caught up to Sully, he already had spoken to the neatly attired man behind the desk, who had picked up a phone and was having a conversation while half turned away from them. A moment later he hung up the phone and informed them that someone from Dr. Cheney’s team would be down to fetch them momentarily. Drake fought the temptation to make a crack about anyone “fetching” them and joined Sully and Jada in standing around an enormous plant, trying not to look awkward.

An attractive young woman arrived to fetch them, introducing herself as a graduate student working with Dr. Cheney. She wore her hair up in a loose bun, artfully disarrayed, and though her dark red sweater and gray skirt were fashionable and neat, Drake thought she looked more like a movie superspy masquerading as a museum employee than an actual graduate student. She made him want to enroll in classes or become a museum curator, and though Jada and Sully asked her questions while she let them up to the second floor, Drake missed the initial bits of conversation.

“—honestly surprised that the board went along with it,” the woman said as she marched up the stairs ahead of them. “Whitney Memorial Hall has been used for special exhibits numerous times, but in this case, they actually relocated the oceanic birds exhibit to the Akeley Gallery. Most of the birds I should say. The Akeley is a smaller space, so some had to be put into storage. In any case, it underscores how enthusiastic they are about Dr. Cheney’s work that they’re willing to go to that extent. He’s been working night and day for weeks in preparation.”

They reached the top of the stairs in a wide rotunda. Through a huge entryway behind him, Drake saw elephants, and the sight saddened him. He had seen the real thing, up close and personal and on their own territory, and encountering them here felt almost grotesque.

“I’m sorry,” he said, tearing his attention away from the elephant. “I zoned out for a second. What is this exhibit Mr. Cheney’s working on?”

The question earned him a look of scorn from their guide. “Dr. Cheney’s exhibit is called ‘Labyrinths of the Ancient World.’ His research into historical records and the physical evidence has been groundbreaking.”

“And he’s the curator of the exhibit?” Jada asked.

“Of course,” the graduate student sniffed, growing impatient and visibly irritated at their ignorance.

Without another word, all courtesy forgotten, she strode from the rotunda and down a short corridor past restrooms and a coatroom. A velvet rope blocked the huge rollaway doors at the end of the corridor. A small brass stand bore a sign that asked patrons to pardon the museum for its appearance while a new exhibit was being installed.

“They should switch her to public relations,” Drake muttered to Sully and Jada. “Doesn’t she just exude a welcoming warmth?”

Sully shot him a remonstrative glance, but Jada said nothing. She wore a hopeful expression as they followed their guide past the velvet rope. The graduate student used a key to unlock the large door and slid one side open just wide enough for them to pass through.

“Dr. Cheney’s locked in here?” Jada asked.

“There’s an employee entrance as well. This was just the most convenient way to bring you in. Arden Maynard has a key, of course.”

Drake tried to hide his smile. *Oh, it’s Maynard now.* Someone had a little crush on her boss.

would have been adorable if she hadn't been such a condescending witch.

~~They entered the exhibit after she and Drake nearly collided with Sully and Jada, who had stopped to admire Dr. Cheney's work. Drake's eyes widened as he took in their surroundings. Just ahead of them were two massive stones engraved with ancient languages: Greek on one side and Egyptian hieroglyphics on the other. A banner hung on the wall to the right, trumpeting the name of the exhibit—"Labyrinths of the Ancient World"—along with the tagline "Can You Find Your Way Out?"~~

"No way," Jada whispered.

"Actually, I kinda think 'way,' " Drake replied.

The graduate student slid the door shut behind them but didn't bother with the lock. Apparently she didn't think they would be there very long.

"If you'll follow me," she said, "I'll take you through the labyrinth. Please don't touch anything and no photographs, of course."

"Of course," Sully said drily.

The labyrinth exhibit had been constructed as a maze, with information imparted along the way through diagrams and scale models. Monitors had been installed in the walls to show animated recreations of the construction of the labyrinths, and at regular intervals there were cutouts in the walls where ancient artifacts had been placed behind thick glass. Some of the plaques identifying the objects were not yet in place and some of the cutouts were still empty, but Drake had the idea that the time was not far off when the exhibit would make its debut. And what a debut it would be. He felt certain that crowds would flock to the museum to lose themselves in the labyrinth Dr. Cheney had built.

What the irritated graduate student led them through was not a full-size labyrinth but only a tiny fragment created to give visitors the illusion that they were lost in a vast, sprawling maze. As they turned sharply angled corners and then doubled back again, Drake decided that Dr. Cheney had done an excellent job. In fact, being lost was no illusion at all. He imagined that when the exhibit was completed, there would be arrows or some other indicator to let people know if they were headed in the right direction, but he would have been lost without their guide, and he thought the same must be true of Sully and Jada.

"Is there a Minotaur?" Jada asked.

The graduate student glanced back at them over her shoulder and smirked. "No. But there will be a false turn that will be very dark, and you'll hear a roar coming from it. Then the lights go out, and there's a whole display about the legend of the Minotaur. We're supposed to focus on history, not myth, but people who come to an exhibit on labyrinths are going to expect *something* on the legend."

Jada started to reply but never got the words out. Whatever she might have said was interrupted by a horrible scream that echoed through the labyrinth, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. A man's voice, in panic and pain.

"What the hell—" Sully growled.

The graduate student froze. "Maynard?" she called, panic in her eyes.

Drake and Jada exchanged a glance, and he could tell by the way she stood that they were doing the same thing: listening, trying to figure out the source of the scream. In the labyrinth, it might be impossible to pinpoint.

"This way," Drake said, taking a left turn.

"No," their guide said, grabbing his arm. "That's a dead end."

She walked straight ahead, and for a heartbeat Drake thought she would collide with the wall. Only when she passed through it did he see the opening; an optical illusion had made it seem like an unbroken surface. Dr. Cheney had outdone himself in creating his labyrinth exhibit, but the time to appreciate it had passed.

Drake, Sully, and Jada followed her through the opening and around a sharp turn that brought them to a fork.

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“Which way?” Jada asked.

The graduate student seemed about to go right, but then there came a crash of glass and the thud of a heavy impact against the walls. Drake darted past the woman, down the corridor to the left. The sound had been close, and with the thud on the wall, there was no question about direction now.

Drake darted around a floor display, brushed the fake stone wall, and took a jag to the right. It felt like he'd reversed direction; for a second he thought the maze had misled him, but then it split into two narrow passages, one in either direction, and he turned left again, rushing in the direction of the crash. He heard Sully, Jada, and their guide pursuing him but didn't slow. That scream had been one not of fear but of pain. And more than pain. He had heard men scream like that only in the worst of circumstances, when blood had been shed and life was fleeting.

“Nate, watch your ass!” Sully shouted.

Drake slowed, taking heed of the warning. They'd heard no gunshots, but he had no way of knowing what waited for them ahead. He dashed past a yawning darkness to his right and wondered if that was where the Minotaur's roar eventually would be heard. Then he reached a turn where the ceiling sloped downward to an arched entryway. He ducked through and nearly tripped over a man sprawled on the floor.

“Damn it,” he muttered, regaining his footing.

A quick glance at the man's dull, vacant eyes—and the stab wounds in his chest and the blood staining his clothes and pooling under him—was enough to tell Drake he wasn't going to make it.

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Blood bubbled from Dr. Cheney's lips as he tried to breathe, and his whole body shook.

Drake surveyed the scene in an instant. A display case had been shattered in the man's struggle with the murderer. Blood smeared on the wall showed where the dying man had crashed into it, trying to keep himself from falling.

Sully, Jada, and their guide ducked through the low passage, and when the graduate student saw the dying man, she screamed his name.

"Maynard!" she cried, and rushed to kneel at his side, murmuring denials and prayers in a torrent of heartbreak.

"Don't touch him," Sully warned as she went to try to lift his head.

The woman glanced up in confusion, but Drake saw in her eyes that she understood Sully's caution. The police would not want the crime scene disturbed. She wanted to help the curator, but anyone could see there was nothing she could do.

Drake turned away from her anguish. He ran to the next bend in the corridor and peered around the corner, listening for retreating footfalls. They were no more than thirty seconds behind the killer, but that could be an eternity if the bastard knew where he was going. He was about to give chase anyway, but hesitated.

"Hey," he said, rushing back to the others, realizing he didn't know the graduate student's name. "Which way is the staff entrance you were talking about?"

She blinked, lifted her gaze from the dying Dr. Cheney, and looked at him. "Back there," she said, glancing the way they'd come. "Through the Minotaur's alcove. It's the dark area on the left as you go in."

But Drake had stopped listening. He remembered. They had just passed it, probably only a second or two before the killer had gone into that darkness. He might even have been hiding there in the shadows, waiting as they went by so as not to make any noise.

"Stay with her," he told Sully.

Sully nodded, though he didn't look happy about it.

Drake ran through the passage in a crouch, standing as he emerged in the corridor. He heard Jada following, wished she would wait with Sully, but didn't take the time to argue with her. A couple of hours with the adult Jada Hzujak and he knew she wasn't the sort of woman who was going to sit idly by when it came time for action.

They raced through two turns of the labyrinth, retracing their steps, and came to the Minotaur alcove. Drake didn't slow, plunging into the darkness, hands in front of him. He stumbled over loose cables on the floor but caught himself on the wall at the rear of the alcove.

"Watch your step, Jada," he said, his eyes adjusting as he found a doorknob and twisted it, bursting through into a narrow, dimly lit corridor that looked nothing like the interior of the labyrinth.

Sound equipment and a workbench blocked the way to the right, so they went left, hurtling down the narrow hall created by the hollow backs of the labyrinth's walls. Plywood and two-by-fours and bare bulbs made him think of being backstage in a theater.

*What the hell am I doing?* Drake thought. Luka had been murdered, and now Dr. Cheney, who apparently had helped him in his labyrinth research, was dying. Whatever Luka had discovered

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