



Enticing Kane (Club Tales #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Two experts. One mission. A game they never expected to play.

Dr. Margaret Dillon never imagined her passion for archaeology would lead her into the heart of danger. At a remote Syrian dig site, she unearths a discovery that could rewrite history—but she also attracts the attention of those who would kill to possess it.

Cerberus operative and former Marine sniper Kane Chaplin, is assigned to protect Maggie from the threat gathering around her.

From the moment they meet, sparks fly—both from their clashing wills and undeniable attraction. But as local militias close in and the true stakes of their mission are revealed, Maggie and Kane are thrust into a race against time.

As danger looms Maggie and Kane must trust each other like never before. Together, they must protect a discovery that could change the world—if they can survive long enough to do so.

Enticing Kane is a heart-pounding tale of danger, desire, and the relentless pursuit of knowledge in the Club Tales series.

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Page 1

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Chapter One

Kane

Undisclosed Location in

The Middle East

Two Weeks Ago

The crosshairs hovered steadily over the target, the world beyond the scope dissolving into a blur of muted colors. Kane's breath was shallow and measured, his heart rate almost nonexistent. His hands, large and calloused from years of holding the cold steel of a sniper rifle, remained as steady as they had been during his first kill. The early morning sun was beginning to rise over the jagged hills of the Syrian desert, casting long, dark shadows over the landscape, but Kane's eyes were focused solely on the man in his sights.

The target—a high-ranking insurgent leader—stood oblivious to his impending death. He was flanked by two guards, but Kane had been watching them for hours. Their patterns, their small talk, the way they leaned on their rifles when they thought no one was looking. Amateurs. He had seen it all before. Kane gently squeezed the trigger, feeling the familiar resistance of the finely tuned weapon beneath his finger. There was no rush, no hesitation—only the finality of what came next.

The shot rang out, a single, sharp crack that echoed across the barren landscape. Through the scope, Kane watched the man drop to the ground, his life snuffed out in

an instant. His guards stood frozen, processing the death of their leader before instinct kicked in, and they scattered like frightened deer.

Kane remained motionless, his eye still pressed against the scope, tracking the movements of the survivors as they scrambled for cover. But they were no longer his concern. His mission was complete.

He eased off the trigger, taking a moment to breathe in deeply, feeling the cool morning air fill his lungs. The distant sounds of the desert began to fade back in, and with it, the realization that this was the last time he would ever have to do this. This was his final assignment, the last time he would feel the cold kiss of his rifle against his cheek.

It had been years—decades, even—of solitary missions, silent kills, and long stretches of waiting in the most desolate places on Earth. The Marines had been his life, his purpose. But now, that was over. He'd put in his twenty years, and it was time for something new. The Marines had given him discipline and a family of sorts, but from the time he'd become a sniper, his connection to other people had begun to distance him from them.

It had infected all areas of his life, including sex. He'd found he didn't have the time or patience to connect with a woman via the normal dating patterns. A friend had introduced him to the D/s lifestyle and to clubs that catered to those who needed to control and dominate in their sexual encounters, not really connect. He'd been like a man dying of thirst who'd stumbled on an oasis. Kane had trained and become an excellent practitioner, but still, he didn't really connect to the subs he played with. He never played without a contract and was not known as a Dom who provided any kind of emotional aftercare.

As he packed away his gear with methodical precision, there was no relief, no sense of accomplishment. There was only the cold, stark realization that he had always

been alone.

Kane moved through the arid terrain, every footstep measured and careful. The extraction point was miles away, but the journey didn't bother him. In fact, he relished the quiet walk through the desert, a place that had become more of a home to him than any city ever would be. The isolation was familiar, a comfort that he understood better than human connection. And yet, the horizon loomed ahead—a tantalizing glimpse as to what his life might be. The question remained: did he want that life, or did he merely want to sink into a civilian life where he played at clubs and perhaps became a professor of history at an obscure university?

As he reached the extraction point, a dull whirring filled the air. The helicopter appeared on the horizon, a dark speck growing larger with each passing second. Kane watched it approach, his face an impassive mask. He was leaving, but there was no one waiting for him. No comrades to pat him on the back, no farewell party. Just the usual silent extraction, a quick flight to the base, and a signature on a piece of paper—his discharge paper, which would mark the end of this period of his life.

The helicopter touched down, the blades kicking up a whirlwind of sand and grit. Kane approached without hesitation, ducking under the rotor wash as he climbed inside. The door slammed shut behind him, sealing him off from the world he had known for so long.

The flight back to the base was uneventful. The pilot said nothing, and Kane didn't bother with small talk. He stared out the window as the desert passed beneath them, a sea of endless dunes and rocky outcrops. It was beautiful, in a harsh, unforgiving way. But it was also empty. Like him. The only time he felt as though he had anything to offer to another person—or even himself—was when he was topping a woman at one of the clubs he frequented.

When they finally landed at the base, Kane stepped out and headed directly to the

debriefing room. The process was routine—he handed over his gear, answered a few perfunctory questions from a young officer who seemed more interested in his paperwork than the man in front of him, and then he was done. His papers were signed, and with them, his life as a Marine sniper was officially over.

Kane walked out of the building; his duffel bag slung over one shoulder. The base was bustling with activity, but it was all just noise to him. He made his way to the transport terminal, where a bus would take him to the nearest airport. As he waited, he scanned the area, his eyes searching for anyone he might know. But there was no one. No one had come to see him off, to shake his hand, or wish him well.

He was truly alone.

The bus arrived, and Kane boarded it without a word. He found a seat at the back, away from the other passengers, and settled in for the long ride. The exhaustion that had been building up over the years was finally catching up with him. He leaned his head against the window, closing his eyes as the bus rumbled along the dusty road.

By the time they reached the airport, Kane felt like a ghost drifting through the motions. He checked in for his flight, passed through security, and made his way to the gate. Everything was a blur of monotonous routine. But when he boarded the plane, something unexpected happened.

“Kane?”

The voice was deep and authoritative, with a strong Scottish accent. It cut through the fog of his exhaustion like the proverbial hot knife through butter. Kane looked up to see Robert Fitzwallace, a former SAS commando and CEO of Cerberus—a highly respected, and some said feared, black ops, intelligence, and security firm. Fitz was a tall, imposing man with a presence that commanded attention.

“Fitz,” Kane said, his voice betraying a hint of surprise.

Fitz was the last person Kane had expected to find. The last time they crossed paths had been in London, at the private lifestyle club, Baker Street, which also served as Cerberus’ headquarters. The club catered to a very specific clientele, and Fitz was the top Dom and owner the club with his wife, JJ. Kane had rarely been to London, but when he had, Baker Street had provided him not only with a place to indulge but a place to stay. Kane didn’t necessarily consider Fitz to be a friend, but they were friendly, and the former SAS officer had seemed to take an interest in him. An interest that was now making itself known once more.

“It’s been a while,” Fitz said, a slight smile playing at the corners of his lips. “I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“Same here,” Kane replied, though that wasn’t entirely true. Fitz was a hard man to forget, with his salt-and-pepper hair, chiseled features, and piercing blue eyes. He had the air of someone who was used to getting what he wanted.

“I heard you were on this flight,” Fitz continued, “and I thought we might have a chat. Why don’t you join me in First Class?”

Kane hesitated, glancing down at his economy-class ticket. He wasn’t one for luxuries, and the idea of spending the flight in a plush seat with a glass of champagne didn’t appeal to him. But Fitz wasn’t the kind of man you refused.

“Sure,” Kane said, finally nodding.

The upgrade was smooth, and before long, Kane was seated next to Fitz in the spacious, quiet cabin at the front of the plane. The other passengers barely registered them, too absorbed in their own world of newspapers and pre-flight drinks.

“Do me a favor,” Fitz rumbled at the flight attendant. “Find me the best single malt you have on the plane and keep them coming.”

“Of course, Mr. Fitzwallace. Mrs. Fitzwallace called to let us know you would be joining us and had a bottle of your favorite delivered to the plane. I’ll see that it’s opened and served to you straight away.”

Kane watched the flight attendant’s shapely backside head back down the aisle. “JJ spoils you.”

Fitz chuckled. “Aye, lad, that she does, but having the scotch delivered is more about letting the flight attendants know I’m a married man than it is to seeing about my creature comforts. But as long as she makes sure I’m getting good scotch, I don’t much care what her motivations are. But I didn’t fly all this way—and on a commercial jet, mind you—to talk about my wife. I came here to find you.”

The hairs on the back of Kane’s neck stood up. “Why might that be?”

“Easy, lad. Nothing nefarious. I’ve been keeping tabs on you,” Fitz said. His tone was casual, but there was an underlying edge to it. “I know you’ve just finished your last tour. It’s quite a career you’ve had.”

“Something like that,” Kane replied noncommittally. He wasn’t in the mood to reminisce, especially not about the countless lives he had taken.

Fitz leaned back in his seat, studying Kane with a calculating gaze. “What’s next for you?”

Kane shrugged. “Haven’t thought about it much. Go home, maybe. Finish my degree. Figure things out.”

“And then what? Live out the rest of your days in quiet solitude?” Fitz’s voice was probing, like he was peeling back the layers of Kane’s soul and searching for something.

“Maybe,” Kane said, though he knew it was a lie. He couldn’t picture himself living a normal life, blending into the background. It wasn’t who he was, but the only life he’d known was the military, and he was putting that life behind him.

Fitz seemed to sense this. He nodded thoughtfully, then leaned in slightly. “I have an offer for you.”

Kane didn’t respond, but his eyes flicked to Fitz’s, signaling his interest.

“I’m going to assume you know something about Cerberus,” Fitz continued.

“Something,” said Kane noncommittally. “One doesn’t play at Baker Street and not know at least something about Cerberus. It’s not like any of you are trying to make a big secret of it.”

Fitz nodded and smiled wryly. “That’s true. The lads are able to let their hair down, so to speak. No one talks about anything openly or shares confidential information, but they don’t have to hide who they are or what they’re about. We handle situations that governments can’t—or won’t—deal with. Off the books, under the radar. It’s the kind of work you’re used to, but with a bit more... autonomy.”

Kane narrowed his eyes. “Why me?”

“Because you’re the best,” Fitz said simply. “And because I know you’re not ready to walk away. Not yet.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh, but I do.”

Kane couldn't really argue with that. He had been a Marine for so long that he was having trouble imagining a life without some kind of mission, some kind of purpose. But he also knew that Fitz wasn't just offering him a job. This was a recruitment, and with it would come obligations, commitments that Kane wasn't sure he wanted to make.

“What's the catch?” Kane asked.

“No catch,” Fitz said with a shrug. “Just a job that needs doing. Think of it as a way to keep your skills sharp while figuring out what you really want. A way for you to test the waters and for me to see if you're as good a fit as I believe you to be. You do know, I'm rarely wrong about these things.”

Kane considered it for a moment. Fitz was right—he wasn't sure he was really ready to walk away completely. And the idea of working for Cerberus intrigued him. It wasn't the same as the Marines, but it was close enough.

“All right,” Kane said finally. “I'm in.”

Fitz's smile widened, a rare expression of genuine pleasure. “Good. We'll get you set up as soon as we land.”

The rest of the flight passed in relative silence, with Fitz offering a few details about Cerberus and its operations. But Kane's mind was already racing ahead, thinking about what the future might hold. This wasn't what he had expected when he left the Marine Corps, but it felt right. It felt like the natural next step.

When they landed in Chicago, Fitz and Kane were whisked away in a private car to Cerberus' American headquarters--Club Southside. The building was unassuming

from the outside—just another old brick warehouse in a neighborhood full of them. But inside, it was a different story.

The security was tight but unobtrusive. To the right was a sort of grand staircase and an elegant, vintage elevator—both of which could take you up to Cerberus' operational hub and safe rooms. To the left was a massive set of double doors, which led to the interior of the club and its dungeon.

Kane was led to the elevator, where Fitz used his thumbprint to engage it and hit the button for the floor where Kane assumed the offices were located. When the car stopped and doors swooshed open, it was all Kane could do not to whistle in appreciation. It looked like a cross between a war room and a high-tech office. Monitors lined the walls, displaying real-time data feeds from around the world, while a group of analysts sat at workstations, monitoring everything from terrorist movements to corporate espionage.

“This is where the magic happens,” Fitz said as they entered the room. “But you won’t be spending much time here. Your work will be in the field.”

Kane nodded, taking it all in. He had expected something impressive, but this was on another level. Cerberus wasn’t just some back-alley operation—it was a well-oiled machine with resources and reach that rivaled most and exceeded some governments.

“Your first assignment is already lined up,” Fitz said, handing Kane a tablet. “It’s in Syria. I know you’re familiar with the region.”

Kane took the tablet and scanned the briefing. It was a straightforward mission—join an archeological dig being run by another operative’s sister. There was a rumor that the dig was being targeted by both the local militia and any number of terrorist groups. But there was more to it than that. Kane could read between the lines. This was about more than just protecting the woman; it was about sending a message to

the militia, letting them know that Cerberus was watching.

“I’m not crazy about this,” Kane admitted, handing the tablet back to Fitz. “It feels... personal.”

“It is,” Fitz agreed. “But that doesn’t make it any less important. And if you do this, it’ll help build trust with the team. They need to know they can rely on you, and you need to know you can rely on them.”

Kane thought about that for a moment. He wasn’t used to working with a team. His years as a sniper had taught him to operate alone, to trust only himself. But he also knew that if he was going to make this work, he would have to adapt. He would have to build relationships, something he had avoided for so long.

“Fine,” Kane said. “I’ll do it.”

Fitz nodded, satisfied. “Good man. You leave next week. Meanwhile, you’re welcome to stay here, or we can put you up in a five-star hotel. As a member of Cerberus and a man who already has play privileges at Baker Street, you are cleared to play here, as well. I think you’ll find the subs here are on a par with those at Baker Street.”

“I’d prefer to stay here.”

“Good man. I’ll have someone see you to your room and let them know you may be playing here tonight. The kitchen is already open. You can call down and have anything you like sent up or head down to the lounge to eat. I’ll make sure everyone knows to expect you.”

Kane didn’t say anything more as he was led to his quarters. The room was large and luxurious. He had to admire Fitz’s style and that the room contained all the amenities

he would need for the night. He dropped his bag on the bed and sat down, running a hand through his short, dark hair.

As he stared at the blank wall in front of him, Kane felt the weight of everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. He had gone from being a Marine sniper, alone in the desert, to joining an elite organization with global reach. It was a lot to process, but Kane wasn't one for introspection. He knew what he had to do, and he would do it.

But as he laid down to grab a little shut eye, his mind drifted back to the desert, to the quiet solitude of his last mission. He had been alone for so long that he had forgotten what it felt like to be part of something larger than himself. Now, he was about to find out.

Tomorrow, he would begin a new chapter of his life, one filled with uncertainty and danger. But for the first time in a long time, Kane didn't feel alone. He felt... something else. Something that he couldn't quite name but knew he needed.

And with that thought, he closed his eyes and let sleep take him, knowing that when he woke, the world would be waiting for him to make his mark once more.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Chapter Two

Maggie

S omewhere in Kansas

Present Day

Dr. Margaret “Maggie” Dillon stood on the porch of her family’s sprawling heritage ranch, the wide Kansas sky stretching endlessly above her. The air was thick with the scent of hay and earth, the sounds of cattle lowing in the distance, mingling with the wind rustling through the tall grass. It was a scene she had grown up with, a part of her as much as the blood in her veins. Yet, she had always felt a tug, a yearning for something more—something beyond the rolling plains and the predictable rhythm of ranch life.

Her family, the Dillons, were as Kansas as it got. Generations had worked this land, and those who didn’t were in law enforcement, like her brother Matt, or some a blend of both. Maggie was the odd one out, the rebel. Instead of following in her family’s footsteps, she had chosen a path that took her to the farthest corners of the earth. While her siblings wrangled cattle and upheld the law, she delved into the mysteries of ancient civilizations, unearthing the stories of people long gone.

Her parents had never understood her fascination with history, with the ancient and the buried. But Maggie couldn’t shake the thrill she felt the first time she’d held a shard of pottery, thousands of years old, in her hands. It was a connection to something timeless, something larger than the small, insular world she had grown up

in. Archaeology had captured her heart, and she had never looked back.

Maggie's phone buzzed, pulling her from her reverie. She glanced at the screen—a message from Matt.

See you at the club tonight? Need to talk.

She sighed, already anticipating the conversation. Matt had been grumbling ever since she told him about her upcoming dig in Syria. He didn't like it, not one bit. He'd given her the usual spiel about how dangerous it was with the region's instability, especially now. But Maggie had always been stubborn, and this dig was too important to pass up. She'd been working toward it for years, and now that it was finally within reach, she wasn't about to let her little brother's overprotective streak hold her back.

She sent a quick reply confirming she'd meet him, then pocketed her phone. There was a twinge of nervousness as she thought about Club Southside, the place where Matt wanted to meet. It wasn't the kind of establishment she frequented—hell, it wasn't the kind of place she'd ever even thought about going to. But Matt had been a member for a while, and his enthusiasm for the club had piqued her curiosity. She wasn't exactly sure what she was walking into, but Maggie had always been one to jump into the unknown with both feet.

Later that evening, Maggie stood outside Club Southside, looking up at the unassuming building. As her plane had a stop in Chicago, Maggie had decided to spend a day or two in the Windy City to check in with her brother, Matt. It didn't give much away from the outside with its simple, dark facade and discreet signage listing Cerberus on the top line and Club Southside on the bottom. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you could easily miss it. But inside, she knew, was a world entirely different from the one she'd grown up in.

She sure as hell wasn't in Kansas anymore.

Maggie took a deep breath, adjusted the strap of her bag, and stepped inside. The first thing that struck her was the atmosphere—the foyer was gorgeous with marble floors, gorgeous, paneled walls, and an elegance that harkened back to jazz clubs and speakeasies. There was an air of quiet sophistication. It was nothing like the honky-tonk bars she was used to back home. A large reception desk stood in the lobby, staffed by two lovely women who took her name and called Matt to let him know she was here. The people who came and went through the space did so with a kind of deliberate grace, their conversations hushed, their movements purposeful. Some went up the stairs, others took the elevator, and still others were buzzed through the large double doors to what Maggie assumed was the club.

She felt out of place, her curiosity tempered by a growing unease. She was a stranger in a strange land, and it showed.

“Dr. Dillon?” asked one of the receptionists. “Your brother asked me to ask you whether you’d be more comfortable up in the office or if you’d prefer to go into the lounge?”

That little shit, she thought, even though Matt was far taller than she was. He thought she’d chicken out and retreat to the Cerberus office upstairs. Well, she’d show him.

“Any chance a girl can get a drink and something to eat?”

The girl grinned. Maggie had the distinct impression she knew exactly what Matt had tried to do. “Food and drink are both available. I’ll let them know to put it on your brother’s tab.”

Maggie laughed. “Lounge it is.”

She followed the woman through the enormous doors. Inside, there was dim lighting, low music, and an air of quiet sophistication. Not at all what she'd thought a sex club would look like. Oh, her brother might call it a 'lifestyle club,' but Maggie wasn't so unhip that she didn't know what went on behind these closed doors.

Once inside the lounge, she scanned the area, looking for her brother, but it was the bar that caught her attention first. Not the polished wood or the rows of bottles behind it, but the man standing behind the counter, tall and broad-shouldered, his dark eyes sweeping over the patrons with a cool, detached interest. He didn't appear to be the bartender per se but was helping himself to a glass of whiskey.

She had no idea who he was, but he had to be the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. She felt her whole erotic system come online. He was dressed in black leather pants and vest—no shirt—showing off his cut chest and sculpted abs. He was ruggedly handsome and had the look of someone who had spent a lot of time in the sun. She'd never had as visceral reaction to a man as she did to him. He was a tall drink of water, and she had a powerful thirst she was pretty sure he could quench.

"That's Kane," said the receptionist. "He's one of our newer members—both at the club and Cerberus—but he's been a Dom for years, and he's been certified in some of the more extreme forms of play."

Maggie wasn't sure how she felt about that, but she couldn't deny the pull of curiosity. Kane was magnetic in a way that unsettled her, his presence commanding attention without a word.

As if sensing her gaze, Kane looked up, his eyes locking onto hers. Maggie's breath caught in her throat, and she quickly looked away, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. But before she could dwell on it, she spotted Matt making his way over to her.

“Hey, Mags,” he greeted her with a warm hug. “Glad you could make it. I wasn’t sure if you’d want to meet in here and grab something to eat or go upstairs and then head out.”

Liar. “Wouldn’t miss it,” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady. “This might not be my usual scene, but the club is beautiful. I can see why you and Pippa like it here.”

Matt chuckled, guiding her to a nearby table, which overlooked the dungeon floor. “Yeah, I figured as much. But I wanted you to see it for yourself before you head out. Thought it might give us a chance to talk.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow. “Talk about what, exactly?”

Matt didn’t answer right away. Instead, he flagged down a server and ordered drinks for them both. Once they were settled, he leaned in, his expression serious. “I’m worried about you, Maggie. Syria’s not a safe place right now. You know that, don’t you?”

Maggie bristled. She’d been expecting this, but it didn’t make it any easier to hear. “I’m not a child, Matt. I know what I’m getting into.”

“Do you?” Matt’s tone was sharper than she’d ever heard it. “This isn’t just about some academic dig. There are real dangers out there—militias, terrorists, you name it. And you’re going in practically blind.”

“I’m not going in blind,” she argued. “I’ve done my research. I know the risks.”

“Research?” Matt scoffed. “Maggie, this isn’t a paper you can write your way out of. This is real life, and you’re walking into a war zone.”

Maggie opened her mouth to retort, but a sudden commotion at the other end of the

room caught her attention. The crowd had shifted and was walking down to the dungeon floor.

“What’s happening?” Maggie asked, her argument with Matt momentarily forgotten.

Matt glanced through the viewing window onto a raised stage that had a spotlight directed to it. “Fire play,” he said. “Kane’s giving a demonstration.”

“Fire play?”

“Yeah, it looks far more dangerous than it is. It is a total mind fuck.”

Kane stood with his back to the crowd, his attention focused on a woman who was strapped down to a padded leather table. The woman was completely naked. She saw a wand-like implement with a mushroom-shaped head.

“Is that some kind of weird vibrator?” she asked.

If her question had shocked her brother, he didn’t let it show. “No. It’s a violet wand. And that spider-like webbing he’s spreading over parts of her body? That’s flash cotton. He’s going to use the wand to set it on fire?”

“Won’t she get burned?” Maggie asked as she leaned forward.

“No. That’s kind of the point. Kane says as long as you make sure the flash cotton isn’t bunched up anywhere, it’s actually pretty safe. The sub gets all the adrenaline rush of something dangerous and painful but everyone I’ve ever talked to has described it as exhilarating and deeply arousing.”

Maggie was fascinated. What looked like violet sparks arced from the head down to the spiderweb material and lit it on fire, making flames of yellow, orange, and red.

Maggie watched with a mixture of fear, fascination, and arousal. The woman shivered in response, but not in pain or fright. No. That was the shudder of a majorly turned on woman.

Kane spread the flash cotton in interesting patterns up and down the woman's body, and Maggie noted that a kind of languid stupor seemed to settle over her. "Is she okay? She looks really out of it."

Matt chuckled. "She's in subspace. It wouldn't take much for Kane to take her to orgasm, but he won't."

"Why not?"

"See that collar?" Maggie nodded. "She's in an exclusive relationship with another Dom. She wanted to experience fire play, which her Dom isn't cleared to do, so he asked Kane if he would do it. This is right up Kane's alley. He gets to get off on the control but doesn't have to get involved enough to have sex with her or provide her with aftercare. Her partner will take her up to one of the private play spaces and take care of her."

As the demonstration ended, Maggie could see the room erupt in applause. Maggie remained silent as the woman's partner came up on stage, shook Kane's hand, and then unbuckled the woman's bindings, wrapped her in a blanket, scooped her up, and left the stage. Maggie was dumbstruck and couldn't seem to look away, her thoughts a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. She had never been interested in the D/s lifestyle, but watching Kane, she couldn't help but feel a spark of curiosity—of what it might be like to surrender to that kind of power, to trust someone with that level of control.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Matt's voice broke through her thoughts.

Maggie blinked, turning back to him. “Yeah,” she said slowly. “It really is.”

Matt studied her for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Don’t get any ideas, Mags. Kane’s not the kind of guy you want to get involved with.”

Maggie frowned, feeling a flare of irritation. “I wasn’t planning on getting involved with anyone. I’m here to do my job, Matt. That’s all.”

“I’m serious,” Matt insisted. “Kane’s... different. He’s been through a lot, and he’s not exactly looking for a relationship. He doesn’t get involved. Stay away from Kane and be careful in Syria.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “I can take care of myself, Matt. You don’t need to worry about me. Your friend seems to have left the building, and my plane leaves before the sun comes up tomorrow.”

Matt didn’t look convinced. “Just promise me you’ll be careful out there. Syria is no joke, and neither is Kane.”

Maggie sighed, knowing he wouldn’t drop it until she agreed. “Fine. I’ll be careful. Happy?”

Matt nodded, though his expression remained troubled. “Yeah. I just want you to be safe.”

The flight to Syria was long, but Maggie didn’t mind. She spent most of the time poring over her notes, going over the details of the dig site again and again. The ruins they were excavating were ancient, predating most known civilizations in the region. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and she was determined to make the most of it.

But as the plane descended toward the small, dusty airstrip that served as the nearest airport to the dig site, a knot of anxiety tightened in her stomach. The reality of where she was going, and the dangers that came with it, were becoming all too real.

Stepping off the plane, Maggie was hit by a wave of heat and dust. The air was dry and harsh, nothing like the cooler, humid summers of Kansas. She squinted against the glare of the sun, pulling her hat down lower over her face as she made her way across the tarmac to the waiting Jeep.

The drive to the dig site was bumpy and uncomfortable, the roads little more than dirt tracks winding through the barren landscape. Maggie clung to the side of the Jeep as they bounced over rocks and ruts, her excitement tempered by a growing sense of trepidation.

When they finally arrived, Maggie's heart skipped a beat. The site was more impressive than she had imagined—an ancient city half-buried in the sand, its crumbling walls and broken pillars a testament to a time long past. She could barely contain her excitement as she climbed out of the Jeep, her eyes wide as she took in the scene before her.

“This is incredible,” she murmured to herself, her fingers itching to start exploring.

“Dr. Dillon? I'm Sara Al-Rashid, your interpreter. Let's get you settled in your tent. It isn't much, but you have a private, composting toilet and a double bed. I'll make sure someone checks it before you return each night.”

“Forgive my asking, but why?”

“Just to make sure nothing that can kill you has taken up residence.”

Maggie smiled. “Don't add to anyone's workload. I've worked in desert digs before. I

can assure you I can take care of myself, but I do appreciate your concern.”

“You are not what I expected. Forgive me. You should do fine, Dr. Dillon.” Sara showed her into her tent. “Welcome aboard.”

“It’s Maggie, and thank you, Sara.”

She took a quick minute to use a little bit of water to sponge off the grime from traveling and changing into more suitable work clothes. Maggie pulled her long, blonde hair back and made a fishtail braid, flipping it over her shoulder. She exited her tent, stretched, and headed toward the dig site.

But before she could take more than a few steps, a low rumble reached her ears. She turned, shading her eyes against the sun, and saw a dust cloud on the horizon, growing larger by the second. The knot in her stomach tightened. It wasn’t unusual for vehicles to pass by—locals, other researchers—but something about this felt different, more deliberate.

As the vehicles drew closer, she could make out the shapes of armored Jeeps, their tires kicking up clouds of sand as they sped toward the site. Maggie’s pulse quickened. She couldn’t imagine who these people might be. They certainly hadn’t been part of the scenario as it had been explained to her. Who were they?

As the Jeeps skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust, the dig workers stopped working and watched them with rapt interest. Maggie instinctively took a step back as the doors opened and armed men stepped out. Her heart pounded in her chest, but as she scanned the group, one figure stood out from the rest.

Kane Chaplin.

He moved with the same predatory grace she had seen at the club, his dark, intense

eyes scanning the area with military precision. He looked out of place here, among the ruins, but also somehow... right. As if he belonged in this harsh, unforgiving landscape.

Maggie's initial relief at seeing a familiar face quickly gave way to irritation. What the hell was he doing here? Damn Matt.

Kane spotted her almost immediately, his gaze locking onto hers. He strode over, his expression unreadable, and stopped a few feet away, his presence as commanding as ever.

"Dr. Dillon," he greeted her with a nod. "I'm Kane Chaplin."

"I know who you are, Mr. Chaplin."

"I'm here to ensure your safety."

Maggie bristled at his tone, at the implication that she couldn't handle herself. "I didn't ask for a bodyguard," she snapped. "I can take care of myself, thank you very much."

Kane's expression didn't change. "Your brother seems to think otherwise."

Damn Matt. Maggie clenched her fists, anger bubbling up inside her. She should have known. "Matt had no right to do this. I don't need you here."

"Whether you think you need me or not is irrelevant," Kane replied, his voice calm, almost bored.

"I want you to leave. I'm firing you."

“Unfortunately, Dr. Dillon, you aren’t the client. I’m here, and I’m not leaving until I’m sure you’re safe.”

Maggie glared at him, but she knew it was a losing battle. Once Matt had set his mind on something, there was no changing it. And clearly, he had decided that she needed protection, whether she liked it or not.

“Fine,” she muttered, turning away from him. “But keep away from me and stay out of my way.”

Kane didn’t respond, and she didn’t look back as she marched toward the ruins, her frustration mounting with every step. This was supposed to be her dig, the first time she was in charge, her chance to prove herself in the field, and now it felt like she was being babysat.

As she reached the edge of the site, Maggie paused, taking a deep breath to calm herself. She had worked too hard to let this ruin her focus. Kane might be an unwelcome intrusion, but she wouldn’t let him distract her from the work that mattered.

As she surveyed the ruins, her excitement returned, washing away some of the tension. This was what she had dreamed of—standing on the edge of history, ready to uncover its secrets. Whatever else was happening, whatever dangers might be lurking, this was where she belonged.

Still, as she began her work, Maggie couldn’t help but notice the way the local workers glanced nervously at the horizon, whispering among themselves about nearby militia activity. The tension in the air was palpable, a constant reminder that she was far from the safety of home.

And despite her irritation, despite her insistence that she didn’t need a bodyguard,

Maggie found herself glancing back at Kane more than once, his presence a silent, reassuring shadow at the edge of her vision. He was a man accustomed to danger, a man who seemed to thrive in it.

For now, she would focus on the dig, on the history waiting to be uncovered beneath the sands. But Maggie knew that in this place, far from everything familiar, the past wasn't the only thing she needed to be wary of.

And as much as she hated to admit it, Kane Chaplin might be exactly what she needed.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Chapter Three

Kane

Kane stood on the edge of the excavation site, his gaze sweeping across the ruins bathed in the golden light of the setting sun. The air was thick with the dry heat of the Syrian desert, the kind that clung to your skin and filled your lungs with every breath. Despite the oppressive warmth, Kane's senses were sharp, his body taut with the constant vigilance that had become second nature to him.

He had been in this place for over a week now, and each day was a study in contrast. The ancient city that Maggie and her team were painstakingly unearthing was a testament to human endurance and creativity, yet the surrounding landscape spoke of violence and turmoil. The locals whispered of nearby militia activity, and while the dig was sanctioned and protected by the Syrian government, Kane knew better than to put any trust in official assurances. Danger was always lurking just out of sight, waiting for a moment of weakness.

Kane's eyes found Maggie, as they did far too frequently, who was standing in a trench, meticulously brushing away centuries of dirt from a broken column. Even from this distance, he could see the intensity in her expression, the way her brow furrowed in concentration. It was a look he had come to recognize in her—a mix of determination and reverence, as if she were communing with the past itself.

Over the years, his duty had been to neutralize or eliminate threats as opposed to protecting someone's older sister. But there was no way he'd allow anyone to take on this responsibility. There was something different about Maggie. It wasn't just her

intelligence, though that was undeniable, or her passion, which she wore on her sleeve. It was the way she threw herself into her work with an almost reckless abandon, a single-minded focus that often made her forget the world around her—forget the dangers that could strike at any moment.

That stubbornness frustrated him to no end. Kane was used to working with professionals who understood the importance of caution, who followed orders without question. Maggie, on the other hand, seemed to thrive on pushing boundaries, testing limits. It was maddening, and yet... he couldn't help but admire her for it.

Kane shook his head, pulling his focus back to the perimeter of the site. This wasn't the time to be distracted, especially not by the person he was supposed to be protecting. But the truth was, Maggie had been a constant presence in his thoughts since the moment he arrived. She challenged him in ways he wasn't used to, and that intrigued him. Maybe more than it should.

As the day wore on and the sun dipped lower in the sky, the team began to pack up their tools, preparing to retreat to their tents for the night. Kane stayed on the edge of the site, his eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of trouble. The workers were moving slower than usual, their fatigue evident after another long day under the relentless sun. Kane's instincts told him that this was the most vulnerable time—when exhaustion set in, and vigilance slipped.

His gaze drifted back to Maggie, who was reluctantly handing off her tools to one of the assistants. She was talking animatedly, her hands moving as she explained something about the column they had been uncovering. Her eyes sparkled with excitement, her face flushed from the heat and exertion. Even from a distance, Kane could feel the energy radiating off her.

But with that excitement came the inevitable carelessness. Kane had lost count of how many times he had to remind her to stay within the secured areas, to not wander

off alone, to always be aware of her surroundings. And every time, she had pushed back, insisting that she knew what she was doing, that she didn't need a babysitter.

Kane let out a slow breath, willing himself to remain calm. Protecting Maggie was his job, and he took that responsibility seriously, even if she made it harder than it needed to be. But her refusal to adhere to safety protocols grated on him, not just because it made his job more difficult, but because he genuinely cared about her safety. More than he should.

As the last of the team headed back to camp, Kane took one last sweep of the site before following. The sun had nearly set, and the temperature was beginning to drop, the desert's warmth giving way to a cooler, more comfortable night. But even as the physical heat dissipated, something else simmered just beneath the surface—something Kane had been trying to ignore.

That night, Kane tossed and turned in his cot, sleep eluding him despite the exhaustion that pulled at his muscles. His mind kept drifting back to Maggie, to the way she had looked earlier in the day, her hair falling loose from its braid, her skin glowing with sweat and sun. He could still see the way she had smiled as she uncovered a particularly well-preserved artifact, the light in her eyes so bright it had taken his breath away.

Kane rolled onto his back, staring up at the dark canvas of the tent. He needed to get a grip. Maggie was his charge, nothing more. And she was a friend's sister. Men like Kane didn't have many friends, and they didn't mess with the sisters of those he'd come to care about. It didn't matter how smart, or beautiful, or frustrating she was—his job was to protect her, not to think about her in any other way.

But try as he might, the thoughts wouldn't leave him. He could still feel the pull of her presence, the way she occupied his thoughts even when she wasn't around. And as he lay there, the image of her smiling face morphed into something more—a vision

of her standing before him, not in the dusty ruins of Syria, but in a place more private, more intimate.

In his mind's eye, Maggie was standing in his tent, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders, her eyes fixed on him with a look that was equal parts curiosity and desire. She was close enough that he could feel the warmth of her body, smell the faint scent of sweat and earth that clung to her skin.

Kane sat up, reaching out to her, his fingers brushing against the soft curve of her waist. Her skin was warm, her breath hitching as his touch lingered. She didn't pull away—instead, she stepped closer, her hands coming to rest on his chest, fingers splaying out over his heart.

He could feel the quickened beat of his pulse beneath her touch, the tension in the air thick and heady. There was a moment of stillness, of breathless anticipation, before she leaned in, her lips brushing against his in a feather-light kiss. It was tentative at first, as if testing the waters, but when he didn't pull back, she pressed harder, her lips parting to deepen the kiss.

Kane's hands moved to her back, pulling her closer, his need for her eclipsing all other thoughts. The kiss grew more urgent, more demanding, as if years of pent-up desire were being released all at once. He could feel her responding in kind, her body pressing against his, her nails digging into his shoulders.

He broke the kiss only long enough to trail his lips down the line of her jaw, to the soft skin of her neck. She gasped, her hands tangling in his hair as he explored the sensitive spot just beneath her ear. The sound of her breathless moans was like fuel to a fire he had been trying to suppress, and it blazed hotter with every passing second.

His hands roamed over her body, finding the hem of her shirt and pulling it over her head in one swift motion. She helped him, lifting her arms and letting the fabric fall

to the ground. He took a moment to look at her, to drink in the sight of her standing before him, her skin glowing in the dim light of the tent.

She was beautiful, more than he had ever allowed himself to admit, and the sight of her like this—bare, vulnerable, and completely open to him—stirred something deep within him. He reached out again, this time with more urgency, his hands finding her breasts, his thumbs brushing over her nipples. She shivered under his touch, her head falling back as she let out a soft moan.

Kane's lips followed the path of his hands, kissing and nipping at the soft skin of her chest, her stomach, until he was on his knees before her. He looked up, meeting her gaze, and saw the same desire mirrored in her eyes. Without a word, she nodded, giving him the permission he didn't need but wanted all the same.

He pressed his lips to her belly, his hands sliding down to her hips, gripping them firmly as he kissed his way lower. She shuddered, her breath coming in short gasps, her fingers gripping his shoulders as he reached the waistband of her pants. He paused, looking up at her again, and when she nodded once more, he pulled them down, letting the fabric pool at her feet.

She stepped out of them, and Kane took a moment to appreciate the sight of her standing completely naked in front of him. She was perfect—every curve, every line of her body like a work of art, and he couldn't resist the urge to touch, to taste.

His mouth found her again, this time lower, his lips pressing against the soft skin of her inner thigh. She gasped, her hands tightening their grip on his shoulders as he teased her, kissing and licking his way closer to where she wanted him most. When he finally reached her core, she let out a low moan, her hips bucking forward as he tasted her for the first time.

Kane's world narrowed to just this—just her, the feel of her in his mouth, the sound

of her moans, the way her body trembled under his touch. He could feel her getting closer, her breaths coming faster, her grip on his shoulders almost painful as she rode the wave of pleasure he was giving her.

But just as she was about to tip over the edge, the sound of something outside the tent pulled him back to reality. Kane blinked, the dream fading away before he could keep it from evaporating. Something was wrong. Grabbing his weapon, Kane slipped out of his tent through a back slit he had created the first night he was in camp.

The night air was cool against his skin, a stark contrast to the suffocating heat of the day. The camp was quiet; the only sounds were the soft rustling of the desert breeze and the distant call of some nocturnal creature. The sky was a deep indigo, scattered with stars that seemed to shine brighter out here, far from the lights of civilization.

Kane took a deep breath, letting the crispness of the night clear his head. It had been a long day, filled with tense discussions and the constant vigilance that came with protecting a high-profile archaeological team in a volatile region. But something didn't sit right with him, something beyond the usual concerns of security and safety. There was an undercurrent of unease that he couldn't shake, a sense that they were all standing on the edge of a precipice without knowing what lay below.

As he turned to head toward the perimeter, a flicker of movement caught his eye—a shadow shifting near the excavation site. His muscles tensed, every instinct on high alert. The workers were all accounted for, and the site had been cleared hours ago. Whoever—or whatever—was out there had no business being there.

Moving swiftly, but silently, Kane's steps barely stirred the sand beneath his boots. He kept to the shadows; his eyes locked on the area where he had seen the movement. The night was his ally, and he used it to his advantage, blending into the darkness as he approached.

The closer he got, the more his senses sharpened. He could hear the faint rustling of fabric, the sound of breathing—someone was definitely out there. Kane brought his M27 up into the firing position, his fingers wrapping around the grip with a familiarity born of years in the field. He approached the excavation site, every nerve on edge, his body coiled like a spring ready to snap.

As he rounded a large rock that jutted out from the ground, he caught sight of the intruder. The figure was crouched near one of the partially uncovered stone slabs, their attention focused on the symbols etched into the ancient rock. Kane could see the glint of something metallic in their hand—possibly a tool, but it could just as easily be a weapon.

Kane stepped closer, his voice low and commanding. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

The figure froze, his head snapping up to look at him. In the dim light, Kane could make out a man, middle-aged, with a look of panic in his eyes. The man scrambled to his feet, his hands raised in a gesture of surrender, but Kane didn’t relax. His finger hovered near the trigger, ready to act if the situation escalated.

“Who are you?” Kane demanded, his tone leaving no room for lies.

“I-I’m just a local,” the man stammered, his voice trembling. “I didn’t mean any harm. I was just curious... about the dig.”

Kane’s eyes narrowed. The man’s story didn’t add up. No local would risk sneaking into a guarded site just out of curiosity, especially not at this hour. “What were you doing with that stone?” Kane asked, his voice icy.

The man hesitated, his gaze flicking nervously between Kane and the slab. “I... I was just looking. I heard stories... about what’s buried here. I wanted to see it for

myself.”

Kane didn't believe a word of it. “You've seen enough. Now get out of here before I decide to take you in for questioning.”

The man nodded rapidly, clearly eager to escape. He backed away slowly, then turned and bolted into the darkness, his footsteps fading into the night. Kane watched him go; his eyes narrowed in suspicion. There was more to this than a simple trespasser. The man had been too interested in the symbols, too intent on whatever he had been doing.

Syria's laws regarding their ancient objects were harsh, and locals knew better than to risk it. There was a market for antiquities, and the prices could tempt some, but like so many things, stealing and smuggling relics had fallen to more organized, better-funded, and well-armed organizations.

Kane knelt beside the slab, examining it closely. There was nothing immediately out of place, but his instincts told him that the man had been searching for something specific. He made a mental note to inform Maggie and the rest of the team in the morning, though he doubted they would sleep any easier knowing that someone had been poking around their dig site.

He stood, his mind already moving to the next task. There was a strategy session scheduled for later, one he had been dreading but knew was necessary. Colonel John Carter had joined them and had been unusually tight-lipped about the full scope of his mission and the role his team played in it. Kane was determined to get some answers. Whatever was happening here, there was more to it than anyone knew. He might be here to protect Maggie, but he had expanded his own responsibilities to include protecting the entire archaeological team, and Kane needed to know what he was up against.

The strategy session was held in a large, reinforced tent that served as the command center for the operation. The space was dominated by a table strewn with maps, satellite images, and various reports. A few military personnel were gathered around it, their expressions serious, though their eyes flicked to Kane with a mixture of respect and wariness as he entered. Colonel Carter stood at the head of the table; his tall, imposing figure framed by the dim light of the lanterns hanging overhead.

Kane walked in, his presence commanding attention. He didn't bother with pleasantries, moving directly to the table and taking a seat across from Carter, laying his M27 on the table. The tension in the room was palpable, the air thick with unspoken questions and hidden agendas.

Carter wasted no time, his voice curt as he began the briefing. "Our primary objective remains the same—the protection of Dr. Dillon and her team. However, recent developments have forced us to reassess the situation."

Kane's eyes narrowed. "What developments?"

Carter met his gaze, his expression unreadable. "We've received intelligence that suggests the site may be of interest to more than just academic circles and the Syrian's Department of Antiquities. Certain factions in the region have taken an interest in the artifacts being uncovered, and they may attempt to take control of the site."

Kane leaned forward, his voice low and dangerous. "What aren't you telling me, Colonel? What's really at stake here?"

Carter's jaw tightened, but he didn't look away. "That's classified, Chaplin. All you need to know is that we're dealing with a potential threat, and it's your job to ensure that threat doesn't materialize."

Kane's frustration flared. "That's not good enough. I don't answer to you, and my only actual responsibility is to protect Dr. Dillon. I've expanded that to include her bunch of archaeologists, but now you're telling me there's more to it? I need to know what we're up against."

Carter's eyes flashed with irritation, but he kept his tone controlled. "You're a contractor, Chaplin. Your job is to follow orders, not to question them."

Kane's hand curled into a fist beneath the table. He had dealt with plenty of military brass in his time, and he knew when someone was holding back vital information. But Carter's stonewalling was putting them all at risk, and that was something Kane couldn't accept.

"If you expect me to cooperate with you and take lead on protecting these people, I need the full picture," Kane insisted, his voice a growl. "I don't care about your classified bullshit. If there's more at stake than you're letting on, I need to know what it is."

For a moment, the room was silent, the tension between Kane and Carter thick enough to cut with a knife. Finally, Carter sighed, his shoulders relaxing slightly. "All right, Chaplin. I'll give you this much: there's a belief that the artifacts Dr. Dillon is working to uncover could be of significant value—not just historically, but strategically. There are... certain parties interested in acquiring them for reasons that go beyond simple academic curiosity."

Kane's mind raced as he absorbed this information. "Strategically? You mean they could be weaponized?"

Carter didn't answer directly, but the look in his eyes was enough. Kane sat back in his chair, the pieces of the puzzle starting to come together. He'd wondered why the military had made their presence known a couple of days after his arrival. This wasn't

just about protecting Maggie and her team from local militias or opportunistic thieves. This was about something far more dangerous—something that could shift the balance of power in the region, or even beyond.

“Why wasn’t I told this from the moment you got here?” Kane asked, his voice calm but laced with anger.

“Because it wasn’t your concern,” Carter replied, his tone cold. “Your job is to keep them safe, and that hasn’t changed. The specifics of the mission are above your pay grade.”

Kane’s eyes narrowed. “You have no idea what my pay grade might be. Cerberus pays its people really well. And if those specifics put my team at risk, they are my concern.”

Carter leaned in, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “Cerberus was allowed on this dig site because of your reputation, Chaplin. You’re one of the best at what you do, but that doesn’t give you the right to question my orders. You do your job, and I’ll do mine. Understood?”

Kane held his gaze for a long moment, the air crackling with unspoken defiance. But he knew this was a battle he couldn’t win—not here, not now. He nodded once, a terse acknowledgment of the chain of command, even if he didn’t like it.

“Understood,” he said, his voice flat.

Carter straightened, satisfied. “Good. Now, let’s move on to the next item on the agenda.”

But Kane barely heard him. His mind was already turning over what he had just learned, the implications sinking in like a cold weight in his gut. From the time Carter

and his men had arrived, Kane had known there was more to this mission than met the eye, but now he had confirmation. He'd alerted Cerberus of Carter's arrival; he needed to ensure they knew of these newest developments. And now, Kane was more determined than ever to see this through.

As the meeting continued, Kane's thoughts were elsewhere. He couldn't shake the feeling that they were sitting on a powder keg, and any misstep could set it off. He needed to be ready, to anticipate every possible threat—because whatever was buried beneath the sands of this ancient city, it was worth killing for.

When the meeting finally adjourned, Kane left the tent, his mind a storm of conflicting emotions. The night air felt cooler now, the darkness more oppressive. He started toward his tent, but a movement near the excavation site caught his attention.

His instincts flared to life, the soldier in him instantly on high alert. Without a second thought, Kane changed course, moving silently through the shadows toward the source of the disturbance.

The area around the site was still and quiet, the ruins standing like silent sentinels in the night. But Kane's keen eyes picked up the slight shift of a shadow, the almost imperceptible sound of a footstep on sand. Someone was out there, watching.

Kane's hand went to his weapon, the cool metal a reassuring presence at his side. He moved closer, his senses attuned to every sound, every flicker of movement. This was no ordinary trespasser—whoever it was knew how to move in the dark, how to avoid detection. But whoever it was, wasn't as good as Kane.

He rounded a corner, his eyes scanning the area, and caught a glimpse of a figure slipping between two crumbling walls. They were fast, but Kane was faster. He moved in pursuit, his steps silent as death.

The figure darted ahead, disappearing into the shadows of the ruins. Kane followed, his body tense, ready for anything. He knew these ruins better than anyone—every corner, every hidden alcove. The intruder was heading toward a dead end, and Kane intended to catch them there.

He turned a corner, his gun at the ready, but the space was empty. The figure had vanished, leaving only the faint echo of their footsteps behind.

Kane scanned the area, his frustration mounting. Whoever it was, they were gone. Was it the man he had seen before? But this time, they had left something behind—a warning that this was far from over.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Chapter Four

Maggie

The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows over the ancient ruins that had become Maggie's temporary home. She knelt beside a partially uncovered stone slab, her fingers delicately brushing away the dust of centuries with a small, soft-bristled brush. The excitement thrummed through her veins like an electric current. There was something different about this chamber—something that didn't quite fit with the rest of the site.

Maggie had spent the better part of the morning working on this particular section, and now, as the final layers of dirt fell away, the slab revealed an intricate series of symbols carved into the stone. They were unlike anything she had seen before—curved lines and geometric shapes that seemed to defy the conventions of the historical timeline she had so carefully constructed in her mind.

Her heart pounded as she sat back on her heels, taking in the full scope of what she had uncovered. The symbols were arranged in a pattern that suggested language, but not one that she recognized. This wasn't just a minor find; this could be groundbreaking. The possibilities raced through her mind, each one more thrilling than the last. If these symbols were what she thought they were, they could rewrite the history of the region, challenging everything scholars had believed for decades.

"Maggie, you need to see this." Dr. Hassan Nazari's voice cut through her thoughts, pulling her back to the present. He was standing a few feet away, peering down into a narrow opening they had recently unearthed. His dark eyes were wide with concern, a

deep crease forming between his brows.

“What is it, Hassan?” Maggie asked, her excitement tempered by the serious tone of his voice. She stood up, brushing the dirt from her knees as she walked over to him.

Hassan gestured to the chamber below, his expression grim. “This chamber... it’s different from the others. The symbols—they don’t match anything we’ve seen before. And look at the stonework; it’s much older than the rest of the site. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Maggie nodded, already feeling the weight of his words. “I know. I’ve been working on that slab over there,” she said, pointing to the stone she had just uncovered. “The symbols... they’re completely out of place. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Hassan’s gaze flicked to the slab, his concern deepening. “Maggie, this could be dangerous. If these symbols are as significant as we think they are, it could attract unwanted attention. And with the military presence here...” He trailed off, his unease evident.

Maggie frowned, turning to look at the soldiers stationed around the perimeter of the site. They had been a constant presence since the dig began, but she had tried to ignore them, focusing on the work instead. But now, with Hassan’s words hanging in the air, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right.

“What are you saying, Hassan?” she asked, her voice tinged with worry.

Hassan hesitated, his eyes searching hers for a moment before he spoke. “I’m saying that we need to be careful. There’s more going on here than we realize, and I don’t think the military is just here to protect us. I’ve seen them watching us, taking notes, asking questions that don’t seem relevant to our work. I don’t like it, Maggie.”

Maggie felt a chill run down her spine. She had been so caught up in the excitement of the dig that she hadn't considered the implications of their discoveries—or the potential risks. "But we can't just stop," she argued, though there was a note of uncertainty in her voice. "This is too important, Hassan. We could be on the verge of something incredible."

"I'm not saying we should stop," Hassan said, his tone firm but gentle. "But we need to be smart about this. We can't let our excitement blind us to the dangers. If we push too hard, we could lose everything."

Maggie looked down at the symbols again, her mind racing. He was right, of course. She knew that. But the thought of walking away now, of leaving this discovery incomplete, was unbearable. She had worked so hard to get here, to prove herself in a field dominated by men, to show that she was more than just the daughter of ranchers.

The thought of her parents brought a lump to her throat, and she turned away from Hassan, blinking back tears. It had been years since the accident, but the pain was still fresh, a wound that never quite healed. She could still remember the day they died—a freak accident on the ranch, something no one could have predicted. But in the aftermath, she had been left with a crushing sense of guilt, a fear that no matter how hard she tried, she would never be good enough to make them proud.

"Maggie?" Hassan's voice was soft, filled with concern.

She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's just... sometimes I feel like I'm always on the edge of failing. Like no matter what I do, it's never enough."

Hassan stepped closer, his hand resting on her shoulder in a comforting gesture. "You're not failing, Maggie. Look at what you've accomplished. You're one of the

best archaeologists in the field, and this dig—this discovery—is proof of that. But you can't let fear drive you. You have to trust yourself and trust the people around you."

Maggie nodded, grateful for his words even as the doubt lingered. She had always pushed herself harder than anyone else, always felt the need to prove that she belonged, that she wasn't just a girl from Kansas playing in the dirt. But deep down, the fear of failure gnawed at her, a constant shadow that followed her wherever she went.

Their conversation was abruptly cut short by the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. Maggie looked up to see Kane Chaplin striding toward them, his expression as serious as ever. There was an intensity in his eyes that immediately put her on edge.

"We need to move," Kane said without preamble, his voice low and urgent. "Now."

Maggie frowned, confused by his sudden appearance. "What are you talking about? We're in the middle of something important here."

"I'm not asking, Maggie," Kane replied, his tone leaving no room for argument. "I've found signs of surveillance around the camp. Someone's been watching us, and I don't think they have good intentions."

Maggie's heart skipped a beat, her earlier fears rushing back to the surface. "Surveillance? Are you sure?"

Kane nodded; his jaw clenched. "Tracks around the perimeter, fresh cigarette butts—things that shouldn't be there. I don't like it. We need to move to a more secure location until we figure out what's going on."

Maggie glanced at Hassan, who was already packing up his tools, his expression mirroring Kane's concern. The gravity of the situation began to sink in, and she realized just how precarious their position was. This wasn't just about archaeology anymore; this was about survival.

"But what about the dig?" Maggie asked, her voice tinged with desperation. "We're so close to something big. We can't just leave it all behind."

Kane's gaze softened slightly, but his resolve didn't waver. "We're not abandoning the site, Maggie. But we can't afford to take any chances. Your safety—and the safety of your team—comes first."

Maggie swallowed hard, torn between her passion for the work and the reality of the danger they were in. She knew Kane was right, but it was hard to accept. This dig was more than just a project to her; it was a chance to prove herself, to make her mark on the world. But none of that would matter if they didn't make it out alive.

"Okay," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "Let's move."

Kane nodded, his expression unreadable, but Maggie could see the relief in his eyes. He turned and started issuing orders to the rest of the team, his voice calm and authoritative. Maggie watched him for a moment, her emotions a whirlwind of fear, frustration, and something else she couldn't quite name.

As they hurried to pack up their equipment, Maggie's mind raced with thoughts of the chamber they were leaving behind, the symbols that might hold the key to an ancient mystery. But as much as she wanted to stay, to keep digging, she knew that Hassan and Kane were right. They couldn't risk their lives for a discovery, no matter how important it might be.

Kane returned a few minutes later, his expression more relaxed but still alert. "We've

secured a safe location about a mile from here. It's out of sight and has good visibility of the surrounding area. We'll regroup there and figure out our next steps."

Maggie nodded, though her heart wasn't in it. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were leaving something behind, something that might never be found again. But she also knew that Kane wouldn't let anything happen to them. His presence, his unwavering focus, was oddly comforting, even if she didn't always agree with his methods.

As they began the trek to the new location, Maggie fell into step beside Hassan, her mind still churning with unanswered questions. What was it about those symbols that had drawn the attention of whoever was watching them? And what were they willing to do to keep those secrets hidden?

Hassan seemed to sense her turmoil and placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "We'll figure this out, Maggie. And we'll get back to the dig when it's safe. This isn't the end."

Maggie managed a small smile, grateful for his support. But as she glanced over at Kane, who was scanning the horizon with the intensity of a predator on the hunt, she couldn't help but wonder if they were being drawn into something far bigger—and far more dangerous—than they had ever anticipated.

The safe location Kane had chosen was set within a small outcropping of rocks that provided natural cover and a clear view of the surrounding desert. It was well hidden from the main road, and the rock formations created a natural barrier that would make it difficult for anyone to approach without being seen.

As the team set up their makeshift overnight camp, Maggie's thoughts kept returning to the chamber and the symbols they had discovered. She couldn't shake the feeling that they had stumbled onto something significant, something that was worth

protecting at all costs. But that same instinct told her that the danger was far from over.

Kane was never far from her thoughts, either. His presence was like a constant shadow, always there, always watching. She had resented it at first, feeling suffocated by his insistence on safety protocols and his refusal to let her take risks. But now, after seeing the seriousness in his eyes and hearing the urgency in his voice, she understood that his protectiveness came from a place of genuine concern.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the desert in shades of deep orange and red, Maggie found herself standing at the edge of their camp, staring out into the vast emptiness. She was restless, her mind too full of thoughts to relax. The fear of what they might have stumbled into gnawed at her, but so did the curiosity, the need to know more.

The sound of footsteps behind her made her turn, and she wasn't surprised to see Kane approaching. His expression was as unreadable as ever, but there was a gentleness in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Can't sleep?" he asked, his voice low.

Maggie shook her head. "Too much on my mind, I guess."

Kane nodded, coming to stand beside her. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the silence stretching between them as the desert night closed in around them.

"I'm sorry we had to leave the site," Kane said after a while. "I know how much it meant to you."

Maggie sighed, her shoulders slumping. "It's not your fault. You were right—we couldn't stay there. It just feels like we're leaving something unfinished."

Kane looked at her, his gaze steady and reassuring. “We’ll go back. I promise you that. But we have to be smart about it. Whatever’s going on here, it’s bigger than just an archaeological dig.”

Maggie met his eyes, searching for the truth in his words. There was something about Kane that made her want to trust him, to believe that he could protect her, protect all of them, from whatever dangers lay ahead.

But the fear of failure, the fear of losing everything she had worked for, still lingered in the back of her mind. And as much as she wanted to believe that they would get through this unscathed, she couldn’t shake the feeling that they were on the brink of something much larger—and much more dangerous—than they had ever imagined.

Chapter Five

Kane

The following morning, they broke camp and began to move toward the cave that would be their temporary home until Kane thought it was safe to return to the dig or he could arrange an extraction by Cerberus. The wind howled through the narrow canyons of the Syrian desert, carrying with it the scent of sand and the ominous promise of danger. He led the team with the practiced ease of a man who had spent most of his life navigating hostile environments. Every muscle in his body was taut, his senses on high alert as they moved through the treacherous terrain.

He'd chosen this route carefully, guided by old military maps and the intel gathered from the locals. The hidden cave system they were headed toward was supposed to be secure, a place where they could regroup and plan their next steps without the constant threat of surveillance or attack. But the desert was unforgiving, and the path ahead was far from safe.

Kane kept a sharp eye over his shoulder on the group trailing behind him. The team of archaeologists, exhausted but determined, followed his lead with varying degrees of trepidation. Their expressions were a mix of fear and trust—trust that Kane would get them through this in one piece. Maggie's face was set in a mask of focused determination. She moved with surprising agility for someone whose usual environment involved dusty digs and ancient artifacts rather than craggy rocks and narrow ledges.

As they navigated a particularly steep incline, Kane couldn't help but notice the way

Maggie carried herself. There was a fierceness in her that he hadn't fully appreciated before, a fire that matched her intellect and passion for her work. She wasn't just Matt Dillon's sister—she was her own person, with her own strengths and flaws. The realization had struck him more forcefully than he'd expected, but he'd quickly pushed the thought aside. He couldn't afford distractions, especially not now.

The Marines had taught Kane many things, but one lesson had always stood out: stay focused on the mission. And the mission right now was to keep Maggie and the rest of the team safe. Anything else—any feelings or thoughts that didn't directly contribute to that goal—was irrelevant.

Even so, he couldn't entirely ignore the way his awareness of Maggie had heightened since they left the camp. The way she set her jaw when the path got difficult, the way she didn't complain even when the going got tough—it all spoke to a resilience that he found unexpectedly admirable. And it reminded him of something he had lost when he left the military: a sense of purpose, a reason to keep pushing forward.

Kane's thoughts were interrupted by a sudden rumble overhead. He instinctively threw out an arm, signaling the group to halt. The ground beneath them trembled slightly, and a few loose stones tumbled down the rocky slope. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the area, searching for the source of the disturbance.

"Everyone stay close to the walls," Kane ordered, his voice low but authoritative. "We're not out of the woods yet."

Maggie, standing just a few feet away, caught his eye and nodded, her expression serious. She wasn't afraid—at least, not in the way the others were. She trusted him, and that trust was a weight on his shoulders. It wasn't just about keeping her alive; it was about living up to the faith she had placed in him, whether she realized it or not.

They continued on, the cave entrance drawing closer with every step. But the

rumbling overhead grew louder, the vibrations more intense. Kane could feel it in his bones—something was about to give.

“Move, now!” he shouted, motioning for the team to pick up the pace. They scrambled forward, urgency in every movement.

The ground shook violently, and with a deafening roar, a section of the cliff above them gave way. Kane barely had time to react before a cascade of rocks came crashing down, splitting the group in two. He grabbed Maggie’s arm, pulling her toward him and shielding her with his body as the rocks rained down around them.

When the dust settled, Kane’s heart was pounding, his breath coming in short, controlled bursts. He and Maggie were separated from the rest of the team, the rockfall having created an impassable barrier between them and the others.

Kane’s first instinct was to curse under his breath, but he quickly tamped down his frustration. He turned to Maggie, who was breathing heavily, her eyes wide with shock but otherwise unharmed.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice softer now, more concerned.

Maggie nodded, though she was clearly shaken. “I’m fine. What about the others?”

“We’ll have to find another way out,” Kane said, his mind already working through the options. “They’re trapped on the other side, but they’ll be all right. We just need to get out of here and regroup.”

He could see the fear in her eyes, but also something else—resolve. Maggie wasn’t the type to break down in a crisis. If anything, she seemed to draw strength from it. Most of the subs he knew would have been having a meltdown, but not Maggie. She had more grit than that. In some ways, she reminded him of her younger brother. Matt

had that same kind of quiet courage. The fact was he found himself attracted to her in a way he hadn't been to other women for a very long time.

Kane led the way into the cave, his flashlight cutting through the darkness. The walls were close, the air thick and heavy. Every step echoed in the confined space; the sound amplified by the silence around them. Maggie followed closely behind, her own flashlight beam dancing alongside his.

The cave system was more extensive than Kane had anticipated. Narrow tunnels branched off in multiple directions, some so tight that they had to squeeze through sideways. Despite the claustrophobic conditions, Maggie didn't complain. She moved with the same quiet determination that had impressed him earlier, her mind clearly focused on finding a way out.

As they made their way deeper into the cave, the initial tension between them began to ease. They worked together in a silent rhythm, each one anticipating the other's needs. When they reached a particularly steep drop, Maggie offered a rope from her pack, which Kane secured before helping her descend. When they encountered a narrow passage barely wide enough for one person, Kane went first, guiding Maggie through with calm, steady instructions.

It was in these moments, as they navigated the cave's challenges together, that Kane began to see Maggie in a new light. She wasn't just a civilian caught up in a dangerous situation—she was capable, resourceful, and determined. And as much as he tried to remind himself that she was Matt's sister, that he had a duty to protect her and nothing more, he couldn't deny the growing respect he felt for her.

They came to a wider chamber, where the ceiling rose high above them, and the air felt cooler, fresher. Kane paused to catch his breath, his mind still racing with thoughts of the team they had left behind, of the mission, of the danger that seemed to be closing in on them from all sides. But it was Maggie who filled his thoughts the

most—Maggie, who had proven herself to be more than just a responsibility.

She approached him, her expression serious but not fearful. “What now?” she asked, her voice echoing slightly in the cavernous space.

Kane took a deep breath, trying to push aside the thoughts that had been creeping into his mind. “We’ll rest here for a minute, then keep moving. We need to find another way out, but we can’t afford to rush. These caves are old and unstable—we have to be careful.”

Maggie nodded, but she didn’t move away. Instead, she looked at him, really looked at him, as if seeing him for the first time. “You saved my life back there,” she said quietly. “Thank you.”

Kane shrugged, trying to downplay the tension that was building between them. “It’s my job.”

“No,” Maggie insisted, her eyes locking onto his. “It’s more than that. You didn’t have to pull me out of the way—you could have just focused on yourself. But you didn’t. You’ve been looking out for me this entire time.”

Kane felt a lump forming in his throat, the weight of her words pressing down on him. He had always been the one to put others first, to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves. It was what he did, what he had been trained to do. But hearing Maggie acknowledge it, hearing the sincerity in her voice, made it feel different—more personal.

“I care about the people entrusted to my care,” Kane said, his voice rough. “And that includes you.”

Maggie smiled, a small, genuine smile that made something inside Kane twist in a

way he wasn't used to. "I'm glad you're here," she said simply.

They stood there in silence for a moment, the air between them charged with an emotion that neither of them seemed quite ready to acknowledge. Kane could feel the pull, the undeniable attraction that had been simmering beneath the surface since they first met. But he also knew that crossing that line would complicate everything—especially with Matt in the picture.

And yet, as Maggie took a step closer, her eyes searching his, Kane found himself unable to resist. It was as if all the barriers he had built around himself were crumbling in the face of her determination, her strength, her undeniable pull.

"Maggie..." he started, his voice trailing off as she reached out, her hand lightly touching his arm.

She didn't say anything, but the look in her eyes said everything. There was no fear, no hesitation—just a quiet certainty that this was something they both wanted, something that had been building between them from the moment they were thrown together.

Kane's resolve wavered, and for a moment, he let himself forget about the mission, about Matt, about all the reasons this was a bad idea. He let himself be just a man standing in a cave with a woman who made him feel things he hadn't felt in a long time.

Slowly, he reached up, his hand cupping her cheek. Maggie's breath hitched, but she didn't pull away. Instead, she leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed as she let out a soft sigh.

That was all the encouragement Kane needed.

He bent his head, his lips brushing against hers in a kiss that was gentle at first, almost hesitant, as if testing the waters. But when Maggie responded, her arms wrapping around his neck and pulling him closer, the kiss deepened, becoming more intense, more urgent.

Kane's other hand slid around her waist, drawing her body against his. The feel of her, warm and solid in his arms, sent a shiver down his spine. He kissed her harder, his heart pounding in his chest, his mind shutting out everything but the sensation of her lips on his, the taste of her, the way she fit perfectly against him.

For a moment, the world outside ceased to exist. There was no cave, no danger, no mission—only Maggie, and the way she made him feel alive in a way he hadn't in years.

When they finally broke apart, both of them were breathing hard, their foreheads resting against each other. Kane's hand remained on her cheek, his thumb brushing lightly against her skin.

"Maggie," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "I..."

But she shook her head, placing a finger against his lips. "Don't," she whispered. "We don't have to say anything. Let's just... let's just be here, in this moment."

Kane nodded, understanding what she meant. Words could complicate things, could make something beautiful into something difficult. So instead of speaking, he pulled her into his arms, holding her close as they stood together in the dark, hidden away from the world.

For the first time in a long time, Kane felt a sense of peace, of connection. And though he knew this moment couldn't last, he was determined to hold onto it for as long as he could.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Chapter Six

Maggie

Maggie sat beside the small fire in the makeshift camp within the cave, her thoughts a tumultuous whirl of excitement and dread. The flickering flames cast long, dancing shadows on the rough stone walls, creating an eerie atmosphere in the otherwise silent night. It was as if the ghosts of people from long ago had risen from their graves and now danced on the walls. It had been hours since the rockfall had separated her and Kane from the rest of the group, but they were all together again now, huddled in the temporary safety of the hidden cave system.

Kane had been as good as his word. As soon as they rejoined the group, he had methodically organized the remaining supplies, leaving behind a cache of bare essentials—water, food, medical supplies, and a radio—so that if they needed to flee the dig site again, they could do so swiftly and with some measure of preparedness. Maggie had watched him with a mix of admiration and anxiety, recognizing the unspoken message in his actions: they were not out of danger yet.

She admired his thoroughness, even as the weight of her own responsibilities pressed down on her. The memory of the kiss they had shared lingered at the edges of her mind, a tantalizing distraction that she pushed away with difficulty. She could still feel the warmth of his lips, the strength in his embrace, the way he had held her as if she was something precious. Maggie found herself reaching up to touch her own lips as if she could ensure the imprint from the kiss still remained. But there was no time to dwell on that now. The dig site had to be their focus. The work they were doing—the artifacts they were uncovering—was too important to let anything, even

their personal feelings, interfere.

The message had come earlier that morning: the dig site was once again secure. The danger, for now, had passed. As dawn broke over the desert, casting long shadows across the rugged terrain, the team prepared to return. There was a palpable sense of urgency among them, a recognition that they were operating under a ticking clock. Maggie felt it too, a gnawing anxiety that kept her from fully relaxing, even in the supposed safety of the cave.

Kane, ever the consummate soldier, insisted on a thorough check of the area before they departed. He moved with the quiet efficiency she had come to expect from him, his eyes scanning every shadow, every corner of the cave as if expecting an ambush at any moment. He was methodical, never missing a detail, and she found a strange comfort in his vigilance. When he finally returned to the group, his expression was serious but calm.

“We’re clear,” he said, his voice low and steady, conveying a sense of control that belied the tension she knew he must feel. “But remember, if anything goes wrong, we fall back here. Stick to the plan, and we’ll get through this.”

Maggie nodded along with the others, her resolve hardening. She had come too far, worked too hard, to let fear drive her away from the work she loved. But even as she told herself that, a small voice in the back of her mind whispered doubts—doubts that had been growing since the discovery of the strange symbols in the chamber.

The journey back to the dig site was uneventful, the sun climbing higher into the sky as they made their way across the rugged landscape. The desert, with its harsh beauty, seemed almost indifferent to their presence, its vastness a reminder of how small they were in the grand scheme of things. When they arrived, the site looked much as they had left it, though the memory of the rockfall still lingered in the air, a reminder of how quickly everything could change.

Without wasting any time, Maggie threw herself back into the work. The chamber with the mysterious symbols became her entire world, a puzzle that demanded every ounce of her attention. Hassan and Sara, her trusted colleagues, joined her, their expertise and dedication a steadying presence as they worked together to decipher the markings.

The days blurred into one another as they meticulously recorded every symbol, every line, trying to piece together the meaning behind them. Maggie could feel the pressure mounting, the weight of their discoveries growing heavier with each passing hour. The chamber was unlike anything she had ever encountered in her career. The symbols were older than the surrounding architecture, hinting at a civilization that predated even the earliest known cultures of the region. And as they dug deeper into its history, the implications of what they were uncovering began to take shape.

At first, it was just a nagging suspicion, a feeling that there was more to these symbols than met the eye. They were arranged in a way that suggested a purpose beyond mere decoration, a language that defied easy interpretation. It was almost as if the artifact was enclosed in some kind of protective shielding, and that the symbols were the key to opening it. But as they connected the dots, piecing together fragments of ancient languages and forgotten myths, Maggie began to realize the true nature of the artifact they were searching for.

It wasn't just an artifact; it was a weapon.

Not in the traditional sense, perhaps, but something that could be used to cause untold destruction if it fell into the wrong hands. The symbols spoke of a power that could manipulate the very elements, a force that could bend nature to the will of its wielder. And the thought of such power being unleashed in a world already teetering on the edge of chaos was terrifying.

Maggie's hands trembled as she traced one of the symbols on the stone, her mind

racing with the implications. She had always believed that knowledge was a force for good, that uncovering the secrets of the past could help guide the future. But now, faced with the reality of what they had discovered, she wasn't so sure.

Could they, in good conscience, continue the dig, knowing what might be at stake? The ethical dilemma was unlike anything she had ever faced before. She had devoted her life to archaeology, to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. But this—this was different. This wasn't just about uncovering the past; it was about the potential for unimaginable harm in the present and future.

And if they stopped, who would take over? Someone else would, undoubtedly, someone without their caution, their understanding of the potential consequences. The military, who seemed to have a knack for weaponizing anything? She shuddered. The thought of leaving such a powerful artifact in the hands of others, possibly with less scrupulous intentions, was frightening.

Maggie struggled with the weight of this knowledge, the moral quandary gnawing at her day and night. It was one thing to be driven by curiosity, by the desire to uncover the truth, but it was another to ignore the possible ramifications of that truth. Maggie had never doubted her purpose before, but now, for the first time, she found herself questioning whether they should continue at all.

Her doubts only deepened when she overheard a conversation she wasn't meant to hear.

It was late, and most of the team had retired to their tents for the night. Maggie had stayed behind, pouring over the symbols one last time before calling it a day. She was engrossed in her work, trying to distract herself from the growing unease that had taken root inside her. As she stepped out of the chamber, intending to head back to her tent, she heard voices coming from the direction of the command tent.

She recognized the voices immediately—Colonel Carter and Rupert Langley, the latter being a hired gun—so-to-speak—for the Syrian government attached to the dig. Maggie had always found Langley to be insufferably arrogant, his presence more of a hindrance than a help. He had a way of making everyone around him feel small, as if their work was only important insofar as it served his own agenda. But as she approached, keeping to the shadows, she realized that this was no ordinary conversation.

“You don’t understand, Carter,” Langley was saying, his voice low and harsh. “This isn’t just about some ancient artifacts. There are interests at play here that go far beyond your little protection detail.”

Carter’s response was calm, but there was an unmistakable tension in his tone. “My job is to ensure the safety of the team, as well as protect the interests of the United States. We have a lot invested here. If there are other factors in play that could negatively impact those interests, I need to know about them.”

Langley’s laugh was cold, dismissive. “You don’t need to know anything. This dig and everything that is found here belongs to the Syrians and the Syrians alone. Your only job is to follow orders, Colonel, and my orders come from higher up than you. This dig is of strategic importance, and that means we do whatever it takes to secure the artifact—no matter the cost.”

Maggie’s blood ran cold. She had suspected that there were hidden agendas, that the military presence was more than just for protection, but hearing it laid out so bluntly was a shock. The idea that they were merely pawns in a larger game, that the work they were doing could be twisted for some unknown purpose, was the realization of her worst nightmare.

She backed away from the tent, her heart pounding in her chest. She needed to talk to Kane, to Hassan, to anyone who would listen. They needed to reassess their situation,

to consider the possibility that continuing the dig might do more harm than good. The revelation that there were powerful forces at work, manipulating the situation from behind the scenes, made her feel sick to her stomach.

But when she returned to the main camp, the sight of the team, so dedicated, so engrossed in their work, made her hesitate. How could she tell them to stop, to abandon the project they had all poured their hearts into? How could she ask them to walk away from something that could change the course of history?

Maggie retreated to her tent, her mind a storm of conflicting emotions. She sat on the edge of her cot and stared at the ground, the weight of her decision pressing down on her. She thought of her parents, of the legacy they had left her, of the fear of failure that had driven her to push so hard, to prove herself.

The memory of their accident flashed through her mind—their lives cut short in a freak incident on the ranch, leaving her with a lifetime of questions and a gnawing sense of guilt. She had thrown herself into her work, driven by the need to make something of herself, to prove that she was more than just the daughter of ranchers. But now, faced with the possibility that her work could lead to disaster, she found herself questioning everything.

This was bigger than her, bigger than any one person. This was about the potential for destruction, for suffering on a scale she couldn't even begin to imagine. And the more she thought about it, the more she realized that she couldn't, in good conscience, continue down this path without considering the consequences.

Kane had always been the voice of reason, the one who reminded her of the importance of caution, of thinking things through before acting. She knew she needed to talk to him, to lay out what she had heard and what she had discovered. But even as she thought about it, there was a part of her that feared what his reaction would be.

She trusted him more than she trusted anyone else in this situation. But she also knew that he was not here because he believed in her mission. He was here because her brother had insisted he come to provide her with protection. His instinct was first, last, and always to complete the mission. What if he didn't see things the way she did? What if he insisted they abandon the dig? What if she insisted they continue despite the risks?

Maggie shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She couldn't make this decision alone, and she couldn't keep it to herself. She needed to talk to Kane, to Hassan, to the others. But how could she find the right words to express the fear that had taken hold of her, the fear that they were about to unleash something they couldn't control?

As she lay back on her cot, staring up at the canvas ceiling of her tent, Maggie felt a profound sense of isolation. She had always prided herself on her independence, on her ability to face challenges head-on. But this was different. This was a challenge that went beyond her expertise, beyond her ability to solve on her own.

And as much as she hated to admit it, she needed help. She needed someone to tell her that it was okay to be afraid, to doubt, to question. She needed someone to help her carry the burden of the knowledge she had uncovered.

Maggie closed her eyes, trying to find some semblance of peace in the midst of the storm. But the thoughts kept coming, the doubts and fears swirling in her mind like a desert sandstorm, relentless and inescapable.

Over the next few days—if she still felt the same—she would find time to talk to Kane, to Hassan, to anyone who would listen. Tomorrow, she would lay it all out, the discoveries, the overheard conversation, the doubts that gnawed at her. They needed to make a decision—together—about whether to continue the dig or to walk away, leaving the past buried where it belonged.

But tonight, she would allow herself to feel the weight of it all, to acknowledge the fear that had taken root in her heart. And perhaps, in the quiet darkness of the desert night, she would find the strength to do what needed to be done.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Chapter Seven

Kane

Kane Chaplin stood at the edge of the camp; his gaze fixed on the horizon where the first light of dawn was beginning to streak across the sky. The desert around them was still and silent, the oppressive heat of the day yet to settle in. But even in the coolness of the early morning, Kane felt a restlessness gnawing at him, a tension that had nothing to do with the mission and everything to do with the woman who had invaded his dreams.

Maggie.

He placed his hand on her head and pressed down lightly. “On your knees.”

She sank gracefully to her knees. God, she was gorgeous—her skin flushed with need, her nipples stiffened, and the scent of her arousal like perfume in the air.

Maggie ran her tongue around her full lips and opened her mouth. Kane’s cock throbbed as he thrust it past her lips and into the warm, wet heat of her mouth. Her tongue swirled around his length, and he couldn’t hold back a groan. He gazed down at her, watching his cock sink all the way into her mouth until her nose was pressed up against his groin.

Why was it Maggie who did this to him? Why was she so different than all the rest? He didn’t have an answer to that question. He just knew that she was smart, sexy, and as courageous as any of those he’d ever served with. She wouldn’t be easy to

dominate. He was sure she'd challenge him every chance she got. Theirs would not be a quiet, easy D/s relationship. It would be a continual dance for power, and he welcomed the thought of it.

He held her head in place as he began thrusting his cock in and out of her luscious lips. Each time he started to withdraw, Maggie sucked on him with all she was worth, trying to keep him inside her so she could torture him in the most delicious way with her tongue. She wasn't content to simply let him fuck her mouth. No, she was trying to take control and force him to do as she wanted. Well, she would learn that while he could be indulgent, he would still be in command.

God, she felt good. He grasped her head between his hands and began to plunge in and out, over and over, until finally, he drove to the very back of her throat and as she swallowed, he began to spill himself down into her belly.

When dawn came, Kane awoke to his lonely bed, the image of a naked Maggie kneeling before him still fresh in his mind. He sat up and clenched his jaw, trying to shake off the memories of the night before, the vivid images that had taken to haunting his sleep. They had started out innocent enough—a replay of the day's events, the usual scenarios of combat and strategy. But then Maggie had appeared, her presence turning the dream into something altogether different. He could still feel the warmth of her skin beneath his hands, the taste of her lips on his, the way her body had fit so perfectly against his.

Kane cursed under his breath, dragging a hand through his short, dark hair. He wrapped his hand around his incredibly hard cock and began to fuck it instead of her. Harder and faster; he pumped his length until finally, with a groan he hoped wasn't as loud from the outside of his tent as it sounded to him, he climaxed, spitting out his cum onto his belly. This was getting out of hand. He was supposed to be protecting Maggie, not fantasizing about her. But no matter how hard he tried; he couldn't push her from his mind. The more he saw of her, the more he admired her strength, her

intelligence, her determination. And the more he wanted her.

He had always prided himself on his discipline, on his ability to compartmentalize his emotions and focus on the task at hand. But Maggie was making that increasingly difficult. She was everywhere—in his thoughts, in his dreams, in every corner of the camp. And it was putting him on edge, making it harder to keep his guard up.

Kane exhaled slowly, forcing himself to concentrate. Today, Maggie had insisted they head into a nearby town for supplies, and he needed to be sharp. The area was relatively safe, or so they had been told, but Kane knew better than to let his guard down. The recent discovery of surveillance near the camp had made him wary, and the possibility of an ambush was never far from his mind.

As if on cue, Maggie appeared at the entrance to her tent, already dressed and ready to go. She moved with quiet efficiency, her long blonde hair pulled back into a braid, her eyes focused and determined. Kane's heart gave an involuntary lurch at the sight of her, and he quickly looked away, pretending to check the supplies in the back of the Jeep.

"Kane," Maggie called out as she approached, her voice steady but tinged with an underlying tension that matched his own. "Are we ready?"

"Yeah," he replied, not trusting himself to say more. He kept his tone clipped, professional, trying to maintain the distance he had so carefully cultivated since their return to the dig site. "Let's move out."

Maggie didn't push for conversation, and for that, Kane was grateful, but it appeared that she might have something on her mind, but he wouldn't push her. When she was ready to talk, she would. She seemed to understand him in a way few people—male or female—ever did. Maybe that was part of her allure. They climbed into the Jeep, and he took the driver's seat, his hands steady on the wheel as they pulled away from

the camp. The road to the town was little more than a dirt track winding through the arid landscape, with nothing but endless stretches of sand and rock on either side.

The silence between them was heavy, but not uncomfortable. Kane could feel Maggie's presence beside him, a subtle reminder of the connection that had been growing between them since the start of this mission. It was a connection that scared him more than he cared to admit because it was making him feel things he hadn't felt in years.

As they neared the town, Kane's instincts began to tingle with the familiar sense of impending danger. His eyes scanned the horizon, every shadow and movement scrutinized with the precision of a man who had spent most of his life in combat zones. The town itself was small, a cluster of low buildings and market stalls, with few people out this early in the morning.

Kane slowed the Jeep as they entered the outskirts of the town, his senses on high alert. Something didn't feel right. The usual sounds of life—the chatter of villagers, the clatter of market goods being set up—were conspicuously absent. The town was eerily quiet, and Kane's instincts screamed at him to get out, to turn the Jeep around and leave before it was too late.

"Maggie," he said, his voice low and tense, "stay close. I don't like this."

Maggie nodded, her expression serious as she unbuckled her seatbelt and checked the small pistol he had insisted she carry. Her brother had told him she was good with firearms. It was more for show than anything—she wasn't a soldier, after all—but Kane appreciated that she was willing and able to use the gun if necessary. It showed that she was ready, that she understood the gravity of the situation, and it might make others think twice about trying to get to her.

They parked the Jeep in the shade of a building and climbed out, keeping to the

shadows as they made their way toward the center of town. The few people they encountered moved quickly, their eyes averted, their steps hurried. Kane's unease deepened with every step.

They reached the market square, and Kane's eyes flicked to the rooftops, the alleyways, every possible angle from which an attack could come. He caught a glimpse of movement—just a shadow, but it was enough. His hand dropped to his sidearm, his muscles coiled and ready.

“Get back to the Jeep,” he whispered to Maggie, his tone leaving no room for argument.

But it was too late. The trap had already been sprung.

Gunfire erupted from the rooftops, the sharp crack of AK-47s shattering the morning silence. Kane grabbed Maggie and pulled her down behind a stack of crates, his body shielding hers as bullets whizzed overhead.

“Stay low!” he shouted; his voice barely audible over the din. He returned fire, his shots precise and controlled, taking down two of the militants who had exposed their position on a rooftop. But they were outnumbered, and the situation was rapidly spiraling out of control.

Maggie's breathing was fast and shallow, her eyes wide with shock, but she didn't panic. Instead, she scanned their surroundings, as if she, too, had her mind working furiously to find a way out. Kane noticed the shift in her demeanor, the way she focused in the face of danger, and it sparked a new level of respect for her. She wasn't just a civilian caught in the crossfire—she was a quick thinker, and she wasn't about to give up.

“We need to get to the Jeep,” Maggie said, her voice steady despite the chaos around

them.

Kane nodded, knowing she was right. Staying here would only get them pinned down. They needed to move, and fast. He reloaded his weapon, keeping one hand on Maggie's arm as they prepared to make a run for it.

"On my signal," Kane said, his voice calm and commanding. "Stay close, and don't stop for anything."

Maggie nodded, her grip tightening on the pistol in her hand. Kane took a deep breath, his mind calculating the odds, the angles, every possible outcome. Then, with a burst of adrenaline, he stood and fired a volley of shots at their attackers, creating a momentary gap in the gunfire.

"Go!" he shouted, pulling Maggie to her feet.

They sprinted across the square, dodging between stalls and crates, the ground kicking up dust beneath their feet. Kane's heart pounded in his chest, every sense heightened as he kept Maggie close, his eyes scanning for threats. They were almost to the Jeep when a group of militants rounded a corner, blocking their path.

Kane reacted instantly, firing off several shots that took down two of the men, but there were more behind them. He and Maggie were pinned down, and the militants were closing in. The situation was dire, but Maggie didn't hesitate.

"There!" she shouted, pointing to a narrow alley that led away from the market square. Without waiting for a response, she grabbed Kane's arm and pulled him toward it.

They darted into the alley, the narrow space providing temporary cover from the gunfire. But the militants were hot on their heels, and Kane knew they wouldn't have

much time. The alley twisted and turned, leading them deeper into the maze of buildings. Maggie's quick thinking had bought them a few moments, but they needed to make the most of them and get back to the Jeep if they were going to have any chance of escaping.

Kane could hear the militants shouting to each other, their voices growing closer. He glanced at Maggie, seeing the determination etched on her face, the way she moved with purpose despite the danger. She was handling the situation with a level of composure that impressed him more than he expected.

"We're almost there," Kane said, his voice breathless as they rounded another corner. "Keep moving."

The alley opened up into a wider street, and Kane could see the Jeep just ahead, parked where they had left it. But the militants had caught up, and the sound of gunfire echoed through the narrow space. Kane shoved Maggie behind a stack of barrels, using the momentary cover to return fire.

"We need to make a break for it," Kane said, his mind racing for a plan. "I'll cover you. Get to the Jeep and start the engine. I'll be right behind you."

Maggie's eyes met his, and for a split second, he saw something there—something more than just fear or determination. It was trust, an unspoken understanding that they were in this together. She nodded, her jaw set, and without another word, she bolted toward the Jeep.

Kane laid down suppressing fire, taking out two more militants as Maggie reached the vehicle. He could hear the engine roar to life, and he knew they had only seconds before their attackers closed in. He fired a final volley of shots, then sprinted toward the Jeep, his body moving on pure instinct.

Maggie had the Jeep in gear, ready to go as soon as Kane jumped in. He barely had time to slam the door shut before she floored the gas pedal, the vehicle lurching forward as they sped out of the town. Bullets pinged off the metal frame, but they were moving too fast for the militants to get a clear shot.

Kane kept his weapon trained on the rear window, ready to fire if anyone gave chase, but after a few minutes, the gunfire faded into the distance. They were safe, for now.

Maggie didn't slow down until they were several miles away from the town, the desert stretching out before them in all directions. Her hands gripped the wheel tightly, her knuckles white, but her expression was calm and focused. Kane glanced at her, his heart still racing from the adrenaline, and found himself marveling at her composure. He reached over and loosened her grip.

"Why don't you let me drive?" he asked softly. Maggie just nodded. When they'd switched places, Kane said, "You did good back there." He was glad to hear his voice was steady despite the chaotic thoughts running through his mind.

Maggie gave him a quick, sidelong glance, her lips curving into a faint smile. "Thanks. I didn't grow up a rancher's daughter in Kansas for nothing."

Kane chuckled softly, the tension in his body slowly beginning to unwind. The danger had passed, but the adrenaline was still coursing through his veins, making it hard to think straight. He was impressed—no, more than impressed—by how Maggie had handled herself. She had kept her cool under pressure, thought quickly on her feet, and hadn't hesitated when it mattered most.

They drove in silence for a while, the vast emptiness of the desert a stark contrast to the life-or-death struggle they had just escaped. Kane's mind was a whirlwind of conflicting emotions, his thoughts bouncing between the mission, the danger, and the woman sitting beside him.

The dig site was quiet as they returned, the other members of the team still unaware of the ambush they had narrowly escaped. Kane parked the Jeep, his hands still gripping the wheel for a moment longer than necessary before he finally let go. He felt a strange sense of loss as he watched Maggie climb out of the vehicle, as if something important had just slipped through his fingers.

Back at camp, the near-death experience left them both shaken. Kane could see it in Maggie's eyes, the way she moved a little slower, her usual energy dampened by the weight of what they had just gone through. It was a reminder of how close they had come to losing everything, of how fragile life really was out here.

Maggie walked toward her tent, but then she paused, turning back to look at him. Her eyes were searching, filled with an emotion that Kane couldn't quite place. He got out of the Jeep and moved toward her, feeling an invisible pull drawing them closer together.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice softer than he intended.

Maggie nodded, but the tension in her shoulders told a different story. "I'm fine. Just... processing, I guess."

Kane understood that feeling all too well. The rush of battle, the high of survival, and then the crash that came afterward, when the adrenaline wore off and the reality of what had happened set in. It was a familiar pattern, one he had experienced countless times before. But it felt different now, with Maggie.

He hesitated, then reached out, gently touching her arm. "You were incredible today, Maggie. You kept your head when most people would have panicked."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide and vulnerable in a way he hadn't seen before. "I was scared out of my mind, Kane. But I couldn't let that stop me. We had to get out

of there.”

Kane nodded, his thumb unconsciously brushing against her skin in a soothing gesture. “And you did it. We made it out because of you.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke, the silence between them charged with unspoken emotions. Kane could feel the tension easing, the walls they had both built beginning to crumble in the face of what they had just been through. There was a rawness, an honesty in Maggie’s eyes that drew him in, making him want to close the distance between them.

“Maggie...” he began, his voice thick with something he couldn’t quite name.

But she didn’t let him finish. Instead, she stepped closer, her hand coming to rest on his chest, just over his heart. The touch was gentle, tentative, but it sent a jolt of electricity through him. He could feel her warmth, her pulse quickening under his hand.

“I’m glad you were with me today,” Maggie whispered, her voice barely audible. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

Kane’s heart ached at her words; at the vulnerability she was showing him. He wanted to tell her that he felt the same, that being with her had made him feel alive in a way he hadn’t in years. But the words stuck in his throat, caught between the desire to protect her and the fear of getting too close.

Instead, he did the only thing he could think of. He leaned down and pressed his lips to her forehead, a tender gesture that spoke of the feelings he couldn’t put into words. Maggie closed her eyes, leaning into him, her body relaxing against his.

For a long moment, they stood there, wrapped in each other’s presence, the world

outside fading into the background. Kane could feel the steady beat of her heart, the rise and fall of her breath, and it grounded him in a way nothing else could.

He pulled back slightly, just enough to look into her eyes. The fear, the tension, the walls—they were all gone now, replaced by something softer, something more real. Kane knew, in that moment, that whatever was happening between them, it was more than just a passing connection.

It was something worth holding onto.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Chapter Eight

Maggie

Maggie was in her tent, getting ready for bed when Kane tapped the canvas before stepping inside. “You okay? You’ve been extremely quiet since we got back.”

She nodded. “I’m fine; it was just a bit intense. I’m sure that sounds silly to you after all you must have gone through as a Marine.”

Kane shrugged. “I don’t know that it ever changes, and as a sniper, I wasn’t in the middle of a firefight.”

“Do you ever... I mean does it ever affect you in ways that seem weird?”

He grinned. “Do you mean do those who experience something like what we went through today ever find themselves really horny?” She could feel the heat and color suffusing her face. He closed the distance between them and ran his finger down her cheek, “The answer is yes. It’s called battle lust. But for the most part, as a sniper, you’re set apart from a lot of the violence. Mostly I remember how alone I felt with only the surrounding environment as my companion.”

“That sounds lonely.”

He shrugged. “It was, but I think it’s easier than always being in the thick of things.”

“Were you... I mean did you feel it today?”

Kane barked a laugh, shaking his head. “Let me put it to you this way, if I could have found a secluded spot on the way back to the dig, I’d have had you naked with your legs wrapped around me while I fucked you so hard, I’d have had to carry you to your tent as you wouldn’t have been able to walk.”

Maggie laughed nervously, aroused by the imagery his words had conjured. “I think people might have noticed.”

“Not necessarily,” he said. “I probably wouldn’t have let you up until long after it was dark.”

“Kane, do you ever think about me that way?”

“Only every single night since I got here.”

“Why?”

“You have these habits that make it hard to ignore you,” he said, sliding his hand under her shirt and running his fingers back and forth over her belly.

“I don’t.”

“You do. Like when you slide your lips slowly over the fork for every bite that goes into your mouth or blow on your coffee while watching me.”

“So, you did notice,” she said smiling as she unbuttoned his shirt. She really had thought her silly flirting had gone completely unnoticed. “I thought my fantasies were a one-way street.”

“You had fantasies about me?” he asked incredulously as if he couldn’t believe he was the stuff of her fantasies. Was he kidding? Ever since she’d seen him at Club

Southside, he'd been the only man she thought about. And she thought about him a lot.

"Of course," she said cheekily. "I had to find a way to entertain myself." She reached down a few inches to unbutton the fly of his jeans, which was having its strength tested by the hard mass throbbing behind it.

"Tell me one," he said, pulling her shirt over her head, then reaching back and unhooking her bra.

"Only one?" she teased, as she bent down to push off her leggings.

"One for now." He smiled and stayed her hand. "I'm the one who strips you naked. You only remove what I tell you to." He removed her leggings and panties, helping her step out of them. "Fuck," he breathed. "You're even more gorgeous than in my dreams." He stood there for a few seconds, staring at her before nudging her backward and onto the bed. Maggie reached up to cover herself. "No, Maggie, let me look at you. Tell me what you fantasize about."

"You," she whispered. "I can't stop thinking about how you'll feel inside me."

He finished unbuttoning his fly, and his cock jutted out, pointing at her like a compass toward true north. "I don't have any condoms with me."

"No need. I had to have a complete physical before coming, and I've been on birth control for years."

"Same... well, not the birth control, but we get tested regularly, and I'm clean."

She reached out her hand to him. "Then why don't you come and join me? Sara went to a lot of work to get me a bed that was bigger and more comfortable than a regular

cot.”

“You do realize I’m a Dom, right? That I need to have a certain amount of control in my relationship. I’ll take care of you and make sure you get what you need. But in sexual matters, I lead, and you follow.”

Maggie was beginning to like where this conversation was going. “Then why don’t you lead your way back to this bed you pushed me onto and have your wicked, dominant way with me.”

“Fuck. You are going to be the death of me. Your brother is not going to be pleased.”

“Do you really care?”

Kane shook his head. “Not one damn bit,” he said, kicking off his boots and stripping himself in record time. There was something to be said for military efficiency. He stood, all six feet four inches of gorgeous naked body, and she couldn’t take her eyes off his beautiful erection. He shook his head. “I’ve never met someone like you before.”

He joined her on the bed, pulling her close.

Maggie wrapped her arms around his neck. “Is that a compliment?” she asked as she kissed his chin, nose, cheeks, and finally his mouth.

“Definitely a compliment.”

He rubbed his nose back and forth over hers before settling his mouth on hers and kissing her deeply. He bit her bottom lip and forced his tongue inside. He’d just fulfilled another fantasy. Their tongues met, tangled, and danced around. Maggie loved the way he made her body feel. Without warning, he ended the kiss but began

to make his way down her body—kissing, licking, sucking and nipping. Her whole body lit up like firecrackers on the Fourth of July.

“Kane, let me feel you inside me. Please.” She fisted her hands in his hair, trying to pull him back up.

His hand was already resting on her mound, and he slipped it lower giving her clit a sharp pinch. “Patience,” he warned before resuming his descent. “First, I need a taste of you.”

“One more fantasy bites the dust,” she teased as she leaned up on her elbows, watching her body get excited as he teased her skin with his warm breath, lips, and teeth.

“You thought about me doing this?” he asked, pushing her legs further apart and dragging his finger over her heated flesh.

She might have had some saucy answer, but her ability to speak, as well as think, was cut off as he dropped his head, his tongue circling her clit. It was all Maggie could do not to climax. She lay back, lifting her pelvis, trying to get closer, and was rewarded by a sharp nip.

“I lead. You follow,” he rumbled.

Every cell in her body lit up. He pushed two fingers inside her and continued to tease and suck on her swollen nub.

“Kane. Fuck. Oh, fuck.”

She fisted her hands in the scratchy blanket and tried to prepare herself for whatever might come next. Kane sucked her clit into his mouth, and that was it; her body lifted

off the bed, and her eyes flew open as a powerful orgasm swept over her. She'd never experienced any release like that one ever in her life.

Her body fell back as she closed her eyes, reveling in the moment. Kane inched his way back up her body. Her legs fell open wider as he settled himself between her thighs. The head of his cock nudged her opening before he grasped her hips and thrust himself inside. Maggie damn near climaxed for a second time just from the way he entered her.

Suddenly she understood. This wasn't just sex. This was possession.

He stilled, and he looked down at her. "You're so beautiful, and you're mine—not just at the dig, but after."

Maggie nodded as she reached up and moved her hand down the side of his face. "Please. I need more."

He didn't hesitate. He dragged himself back and then surged in again. Maggie cried out from the feelings coursing through her body. The one fantasy that had helped her sleep at night had just been fulfilled. This was way better than her dreams, though.

"Come for me again, Maggie. I want to feel you come when I'm buried deep inside you."

His possession had been almost enough to make her come. The command in his voice had set her free and she cried out as her pussy clamped down on him. He began to pound into her—driving deep, hard, and fast. He changed the angle of his body, forcing her to take more of his weight. Again and again, he thrust into her, allowing her no respite as he took what he needed from her, her inner walls shaking and quivering.

Maggie's breath sped up, and the noises she was making became little whimpers as a third orgasm approached faster than she had thought it would. Who was she kidding? Her past experiences in bed had resulted in a single orgasm... if she was lucky. Her body stiffened in anticipation, and she began to pant, wildly aroused and terrified at the same time by the power he had over her already.

"Again, Maggie," he growled.

It was as if his words commanded her body to do as he wanted. She fell—no leaped—over the precipice into ecstasy as he gave a final, ferocious thrust deep inside her. She screamed into his mouth as her pussy spasmed and clamped down hard, her legs trembling as she writhed in his hold, greedily milking his cock, savoring every bit of pleasure as he held her in his arms.

When he was done, he settled on her, almost smothering her with his weight before wrapping his arms around her body and rolling them to the side, still connected. She fell asleep or passed out—she was never sure which—until he woke her some time deep in the night to have her again.

Maggie had come awake the first time to find herself on her side, facing the tent wall with Kane spooned against her back, his arm thrown over her middle with his hand resting on her mound, as if declaring even in sleep that she was his and that her sex belonged to him. She'd found his other arm stretched over her head and had reached up to intertwine their fingers.

The next time, he'd awakened her by rolling her onto her belly, pulling her back to the center of the bed where he'd dragged her up onto her knees, kneeling behind her and shoving himself deep in her pussy. At first, she'd struggled, worried that it might not be her pussy he meant to use. While one hand gripped her hip, the other wrapped around the back of her neck, keeping her face against the mattress.

“You stay where I put you,” he rumbled. “Not that I don’t have plans for that sweet little ass of yours, but not here and not tonight.”

“Kane...” she started, and then conversation and thinking was no longer needed as he shoved himself deep and rode her hard through three orgasms before driving deep and filling her completely with his warm cum.

He eased her down, still buried deep inside her. “Sleep,” he commanded. “I won’t be here when you wake in the morning, but never doubt that the time of my fantasizing about you has come to an end. I mean to have the reality of your being mine. Do you understand me?”

Happily, she said nothing and drifted off to sleep. She might not know where the future would take them, but she meant to enjoy the here and now. Whatever was happening at the dig was still frightening, but she feared it less knowing Kane would be with her.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Chapter Nine

Maggie

A few days later, Maggie knelt beside the freshly unearthed stone slab, her fingers trembling with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. The dig had been grueling, every layer of earth peeled back with painstaking care, every artifact cataloged and preserved. But now, after weeks of intense labor and careful excavation, they had found it—the artifact that had been hinted at in the ancient symbols she and her team had worked so hard to decipher. The ones that had seemed to belong to a far more ancient time.

It was smaller than she had expected, almost unremarkable at first glance. In fact, if she hadn't been searching for it, she might have missed it. The device, nestled within a protective casing of stone and metal, was unlike anything Maggie had ever seen before. It was smooth and sleek, with strange markings etched into its surface that seemed to pulse with a faint, almost imperceptible light. Despite its age, the artifact looked almost new, as if it had been hidden away and preserved perfectly for this moment.

Her breath caught in her throat as she leaned in closer, her eyes wide with wonder. This was it. The culmination of all their efforts, the answer to the mystery that had drawn them to this remote and dangerous corner of the world. And yet, as she reached out to touch the device, a shiver of unease ran down her spine.

“Maggie, be careful,” Hassan’s voice broke through her reverie, his tone laced with caution. He stood beside her; his expression serious as he watched her examine the

artifact. “We don’t know what this thing is capable of.”

“I know. Hell, we don’t even know what it is,” Maggie replied, though her voice was tinged with uncertainty. She hesitated, her hand hovering above the device. The excitement that had driven her to this moment was now tempered by the fear of the unknown, of the potential danger that lay within this ancient relic.

Sara, her interpreter and also a member of the dig team, approached with the specialized tools they hoped would safely extract the artifact from its casing. “We should document everything carefully before we proceed,” she suggested, her voice calm and professional despite the tension in the air.

Maggie nodded, grateful for Sara’s steady presence. “Right. Let’s take it slow and do this by the book.”

They began the process of documenting the artifact, taking photographs, measurements, and detailed notes. Maggie’s heart raced with a mix of anticipation and dread as they worked, the weight of the discovery settling heavily on her shoulders. This was no ordinary find. The strange markings on the device, the unearthly glow—it all pointed to something far beyond the realm of normal archaeology.

As they carefully removed the last of the surrounding debris, revealing the artifact in its entirety, Maggie felt a surge of triumph. This was it—the moment she had been working toward for so long. But with that triumph came a deep, unsettling sense of responsibility. Whatever this device was, it was powerful, and in the wrong hands, she feared it could be catastrophic.

Maggie reached out again, her fingers brushing lightly against the cool surface of the artifact. The markings seemed to react to her touch, the faint light pulsing a little stronger, as if responding to her presence. A thrill of fear and excitement shot through

her, but she forced herself to remain calm, to focus on the task at hand.

Before she could fully grasp the significance of what she was holding, a shout rang out from the edge of the dig site, shattering the tense silence. Maggie's head snapped up, her heart leaping into her throat as she saw Rupert Langley storming toward them, his face twisted in an angry mask of determination.

"Step away from that artifact!" Langley barked, his voice sharp and commanding.

Maggie's blood ran cold. Langley had been a thorn in their side since the beginning, his presence a constant reminder that their work was being monitored, controlled by forces beyond their knowing. But this—this was different. There was a wildness in his eyes, a desperation that set off every alarm in Maggie's mind.

"What are you doing, Langley?" Maggie demanded, instinctively moving to shield the artifact with her body. "This is a scientific discovery. You can't just?"

Langley's hand shot out, grabbing her by the arm and yanking her away from the device. Maggie gasped, struggling to break free from his grip, but he was stronger than she had expected. Hassan immediately moved to intervene, his eyes blazing with anger.

"Let her go, Langley!" Hassan shouted, stepping forward to push Langley away from Maggie.

But Langley was prepared. With a quick, vicious motion, he pulled a gun from under his shirt, aiming it directly at Hassan. Maggie's heart stopped, the world narrowing to the cold metal barrel pointed at her friend's chest.

"Stay back," Langley hissed, his voice low and dangerous. "You have no idea what you're dealing with. This artifact belongs to us, to the people who can actually use

it.”

“Use it?” Maggie’s voice was incredulous, her mind reeling. “This isn’t a weapon, Langley. It’s an ancient artifact. It belongs in a museum, in a lab—not in the hands of some power-hungry?—”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Langley snapped, his grip on the gun tightening. “This device is the key to everything—power, control, the future. And the people I work for aren’t about to let a bunch of naive archaeologists get in the way.”

Before Maggie could respond, Hassan lunged at Langley, trying to disarm him. The gun went off, the crack of the shot echoing through the dig site like a thunderclap. Maggie screamed as Hassan staggered backward, blood blossoming on his shirt as he fell to the ground.

“No!” Maggie cried, rushing to Hassan’s side. Her hands pressed against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding, but it was clear that he was badly hurt. His face was pale, his breathing shallow, and panic clawed at Maggie’s chest as she realized how dire the situation had become.

Sara was already on the radio, calling for help, but Maggie knew that they were on their own for now. She looked up at Langley, her fear turning to fury as she saw him reaching for the artifact. Where the hell was Kane when she needed him? Usually, he was either underfoot or standing as some kind of ominous watchdog, and now he was nowhere to be seen.

“Don’t you dare!” Maggie shouted, her voice shaking with anger. “You’ve done enough damage already!”

Langley ignored her, his eyes locked on the device as he reached down to take it. Maggie’s heart pounded in her chest, a primal instinct kicking in as she realized that

she couldn't let him take it. Whatever this artifact was, it was too dangerous to be in the hands of someone like Langley.

Without thinking, Maggie lunged forward, grabbing the artifact just as Langley's fingers brushed against it. The strange markings flared to life at her touch, the light intensifying as if in response to the conflict. Langley snarled, trying to wrestle the device from her grasp, but Maggie held on with all her strength.

Suddenly, there was a blur of motion, and Kane was there, his powerful form colliding with Langley and knocking him to the ground. The gun skittered across the dirt as Langley fell, and Kane was on him in an instant, pinning him down with an iron grip.

"Stay down," Kane growled, his voice low and deadly. "It's over, Langley."

Langley struggled, but Kane's strength was undeniable. Within moments, Langley was subdued, his wrists bound with a zip tie as Kane pulled him to his feet. Who the hell carried zip ties with them? And what possible uses could Kane have for them other than subduing half-crazed government archaeologists? She shivered at the notion and wondered when she'd become a sex addict? Okay, the answer to that was easy—since the night she first had Kane.

Maggie watched as Kane sat Langley up, with his back against the wall of the deep trench they were working in. Her breath came in ragged gasps, her hands still clutching the artifact. The world seemed to tilt around her, the adrenaline rushing through her veins making everything feel surreal. She looked down at the artifact in her hands, the light pulsing softly now, as if it had calmed in response to the resolution of the conflict. But the danger wasn't over—not by a long shot.

"Anybody else hearing the theme from Raiders of the Lost Arc?" quipped Hassan, making a joke when he was gravely wounded.

“No, but the one from The Twilight Zone keeps playing,” responded Maggie with a reassuring smile.

“I think you’re both nuts,” grumbled Kane as he turned to her, his eyes intense as he assessed the situation. “Are you okay?” he asked, his voice tight with concern.

Maggie nodded as his stern voice snapped her back to reality, though her mind was still reeling. “Hassan is hurt. We need to get him medical attention, fast.”

Kane’s gaze shifted to where Hassan lay, Sara doing her best to staunch the bleeding. Without hesitation, he moved to assist, grabbing the medical kit they kept at the top of the trench and working quickly to stabilize Hassan. Maggie watched, her heart aching with fear and guilt. Hassan had been hurt because of her, because of the artifact they had uncovered.

As Kane worked, Maggie’s thoughts raced, the weight of the situation crashing down on her. The artifact—their discovery—was at the center of all this chaos. It wasn’t just an academic find; it was something far more dangerous, something that had the potential to cause unimaginable harm.

When Kane finished tending to Hassan, he turned back to Maggie, his expression grim. “We need to secure that artifact and get out of here. We don’t know if Langley was working alone or if there are more people coming after it.”

Maggie nodded, her mind still struggling to process everything that had happened. She looked down at the device in her hands, the weight of it both physical and metaphorical. This was supposed to be the pinnacle of her career, the discovery that would make all the years of hard work and sacrifice worth it. But now, all she could think about was the cost—Hassan’s injury, the danger they were in, the possibility that this artifact could fall into the wrong hands.

When Kane had moved to help Hassan, Sara had scrambled out of the trench and then returned with a reinforced case. When Sara rejoined them, she took Kane's place monitoring Hassan. With Kane's help, Maggie quickly secured the artifact, placing it in the case to protect it from further tampering. Maggie's hands shook as she locked the case, the reality of the situation finally sinking in. This wasn't just an academic exercise anymore; this was a matter of life and death.

As they prepared to move Hassan to a safer location, Maggie's thoughts churned with doubt and fear. Who could they trust? Langley had proven that not everyone at the dig site or associated with it was on their side, and the idea that there might be others like him—people willing to kill for the artifact—was terrifying.

Kane stayed close to her as they moved, his presence a steadying force in the midst of the chaos. Maggie was grateful for his support, but she couldn't shake the feeling that everything was spiraling out of control. She had dedicated her life to uncovering the past, to bringing knowledge and understanding to the world. But now, that knowledge felt like a curse, a burden that she wasn't sure she could carry.

When they finally reached the relative safety of the main camp, Maggie sank onto a crate, her body shaking with the aftershocks of adrenaline. Kane was beside her, his hand resting on her shoulder, a silent gesture of comfort that she desperately needed. She reached up to cover his hand with her own.

"Maggie," he said quietly, his voice gentle but firm. "We'll get through this. But you need to stay focused. We have to keep that artifact safe."

Maggie looked up at him, her eyes filled with uncertainty. "But at what cost, Kane? Hassan was shot because of this thing. And who knows what else could happen? Maybe... maybe we should have left it buried. Maybe it was never supposed to be found."

Kane's expression softened, his eyes reflecting the same doubts that plagued her. "I don't have all the answers, Maggie. But I do know that we can't let people like Langley get their hands on it. You're right—this artifact is dangerous. But that's why it's important that we're the ones who protect it."

Maggie nodded, though her heart still felt heavy. She had always believed that her work was about more than just digging up the past—it was about preserving history, about learning from it. But now, faced with the reality of what they had uncovered, she wasn't so sure.

The artifact sat in its case, a silent reminder of the choices they had to make. There was no telling what this discovery might actually be or lead to. It could possibly change the world, but at what cost? Maggie didn't have the answers, and that uncertainty gnawed at her, a constant reminder that the line between knowledge and power was a fragile one.

As night fell over the camp, Maggie found herself standing at the edge of the site, staring out at the vast expanse of desert that stretched before her. The stars were beginning to appear, their cold light a stark contrast to the warmth of the day. She felt small, insignificant in the face of the universe, and yet the weight of the world seemed to rest on her shoulders.

Kane joined her, his presence a comforting anchor in the darkness. They stood in silence for a long time, the wind whispering through the sands, the night peaceful and still. But Maggie knew that this peace was fragile, that the danger was far from over.

"I moved Langley up to one of the tents," said Kane. "I didn't think leaving him alone in the actual dig was a good idea."

"Kane," she said softly, breaking the silence. "Do you ever wonder if we're doing the right thing?"

He didn't answer right away, his gaze fixed on the horizon. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet, contemplative. "All the time. But we have to make the best decisions we can with the information we have. Sometimes, there's no clear right or wrong—just choices."

Maggie nodded, feeling a little of the weight lift from her shoulders. "I just... I don't want anyone else to get hurt because of this."

"Neither do I," Kane replied, his hand squeezing her shoulder gently. "But we can't control everything. All we can do is try to keep each other safe."

Maggie leaned into him, drawing strength from his calm resolve. The night was dark, the future uncertain, but for the first time in what felt like an eternity, she didn't feel so alone. As the stars blazed overhead, Maggie made a silent vow—to protect the artifact, to protect her team, and to do whatever it took to ensure that their discovery didn't become a curse. They would face whatever came next together, and that gave her a glimmer of hope in the midst of the darkness.

Chapter Ten

Kane

Kane stood near the edge of the dig site; his eyes fixed on the horizon where the sun had made its final descent. The full moon and the stars lit up the sky and provided a soft, ambient light. The desert stretched out endlessly before him, a vast, empty expanse that held as much danger as it did beauty. The wind picked up, whipping sand across the dig site and into the air, but Kane barely noticed. His mind was elsewhere, focused on the plan he had been carefully constructing with Sara.

Things had changed drastically since they had unearthed the artifact. The air at the dig site was thick with tension, an almost palpable sense of unease. Rupert Langley's attempted theft of the artifact and Hassan's injury had shaken the team, leaving everyone on edge. Someone had slipped in and taken Langley from the tent where Kane had left him. Kane didn't like it. He knew they couldn't stay here much longer—the danger was escalating, and it was only a matter of time before something, or someone, pushed things too far.

He glanced over his shoulder, catching sight of Sara as she approached, her expression as serious as his own. She was one of the few people he could trust in this situation, and together they had been working on a covert extraction plan to get Maggie and the artifact out of the dig site before anyone else could make a move. Sara had connections in the nearby town, and they had managed to secure a vehicle that would take them to a safe location where they could regroup and figure out their next steps.

“Everything’s in place,” Sara said quietly as she came to stand beside him. “We’ll move tomorrow night, under cover of darkness. The route’s clear, and I’ve spoken to our contact. We’ll have a safe house ready.”

Kane nodded, his gaze still sweeping the perimeter of the dig site. “Good. We need to be quick and quiet. The last thing we want is to draw any more attention.”

Sara glanced at him; her eyes filled with concern. “And Maggie? How is she holding up?”

Kane’s jaw tightened at the mention of her name. Maggie had been through so much—more than anyone not trained as an operative should have to endure—and yet she had remained strong, determined to see this through. But he could see the toll it was taking on her, the weight of the responsibility she carried.

“She’s holding up,” Kane replied, his voice gruff with emotion he tried to suppress. “But this has been hard on her. She knows what’s at stake, but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

Sara studied him for a moment, her expression softening. “You care about her.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement, and it hit Kane harder than he expected. He had spent so long trying to keep his feelings in check, to focus on the mission, but it was getting harder every day. Maggie wasn’t just a responsibility to him anymore—she was someone he cared about deeply, someone he couldn’t imagine losing.

“I do,” he admitted, his voice low. “More than I should.”

Sara nodded as if she had expected that answer. “Then make sure she gets out of here safely. We all need to get out of here safely.”

Kane looked at her, appreciating the calm resolve in her eyes. She had been a steady presence through all of this, and he knew that he could rely on her to see the plan through. “We will. Tomorrow night.”

Sara gave a small nod of agreement before turning to leave, heading back to her preparations. Kane remained where he was, the weight of everything pressing down on him. The plan was solid, but the risks were enormous. One wrong move, and they could all end up dead—or worse, with the artifact in the wrong hands.

He turned and made his way toward Maggie’s tent, feeling the tension in his shoulders ease slightly as he neared her. He needed to see her, to talk to her before everything was set into motion. She was the anchor that kept him grounded, even when the world around them was falling apart.

Maggie was sitting just inside her tent when Kane arrived, her hands carefully packing away the last of her research materials. The soft, silvery light of the full moon and stars filtered in through the open doorway, bathing her in a warm glow, and for a moment, Kane simply watched her, marveling at her strength and resilience.

She looked up as he approached, a small smile touching her lips. “Hey,” she said softly, her voice filled with an exhaustion that went beyond physical fatigue. “How are things looking?”

Kane sat down beside her, his gaze steady on hers. “We’re ready. Sara’s made all the arrangements. We’ll leave tomorrow night, as soon as it’s dark.”

Maggie nodded, her hands pausing in their work. “And the artifact?”

“It’s secured. We’ll take it with us. We can’t leave it here—it’s too dangerous.”

Maggie sighed; the weight of their situation heavy on her shoulders. “This is all so

much bigger than I ever imagined, Kane. I thought I was just digging up history, but now... now it feels like we're caught in something we can't control."

Kane reached out and took her hand, his thumb brushing lightly over her knuckles. "We'll get through this, Maggie. I promise you that. We'll get out of here, and we'll figure out what to do next."

Maggie looked at him, her eyes searching his for reassurance. "What if we're too late? What if the damage is already done?"

Kane tightened his grip on her hand, his gaze firm. "We're not too late. We have a chance to make things right, to protect what we've found. But we have to stay focused, stay strong. We'll be out of here soon," Kane said quietly, his thumb brushing lightly over the back of her hand. "Sara and I have everything planned. You just need to trust me."

"I do trust you," Maggie replied, her eyes meeting his with a sincerity that took him by surprise. "I don't know what I would have done without you, Kane. You've been... more than I ever expected."

Kane felt his heart skip a beat at her words, a warmth spreading through him that had nothing to do with the desert air. He had been in situations like this before—missions where he was the protector, the one who got everyone out alive. But this was different. Maggie was different. And that terrified him more than he was willing to admit.

"You would have found a way," Kane said, trying to deflect the praise. "You're stronger than you think, Maggie."

She smiled, a small, wistful smile that tugged at something deep inside him. "I don't feel strong," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I feel... scared. Not just

for myself, but for everyone. For what we've uncovered. I'm afraid of what it could mean, of what might happen if we can't control it. I'm afraid that somehow, I've unleashed something that was meant to be buried away."

Kane's hand tightened around hers, his resolve hardening. "You're not alone in this," he said firmly. "We'll figure it out together. Whatever happens, I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

Maggie looked at him, her eyes searching his as if trying to find something in the depths of his gaze. Kane could see the vulnerability there, the uncertainty that she kept hidden behind her strength. It was the same vulnerability he felt every time he looked at her, the same fear of what might happen if they allowed themselves to get too close.

But in that moment, with the night closing in around them and the weight of the world pressing down on their shoulders, it didn't matter. Kane leaned in, closing the distance between them, and gently pressed his lips to hers.

Maggie responded immediately, her hand coming up to rest on his cheek as she kissed him back. The touch was soft, tentative at first, but it quickly deepened as they both surrendered to the emotions that had been building between them for so long.

Kane's arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer as the kiss intensified. The warmth of her body against his, the taste of her lips, the way she fit so perfectly in his arms—it all sent a surge of desire through him that he couldn't ignore.

"Maggie," he murmured against her lips, his voice husky with need.

She pulled back just enough to look at him, her eyes dark with longing. "Kane," she whispered, her breath warm against his skin. "I... I need this. I need you."

Kane didn't need to be told twice. He stood, pulling her up with him, and led her into the tent. The darkness inside was comforting, the outside world fading away as they focused on each other. Kane's hands moved to the buttons of her shirt; his touch gentle but insistent as he began to undress her.

Maggie's fingers fumbled with his belt, her urgency matching his own as they worked to shed their clothes. There was no hesitation, no second guessing—just the raw need to be together, to find solace in each other's arms.

When they were finally skin to skin, Kane pulled her down onto the bed, his hands roaming over her body with a tenderness that surprised even him. Maggie gasped softly as he kissed her neck, his lips trailing down to her collarbone, her skin warm and soft beneath his touch.

"Kane," she breathed, her hands tangling in his hair as he continued his descent, kissing a path down her chest. "Please... I need you."

Kane's heart pounded in his chest; the intensity of his desire almost overwhelming. He looked up at her, seeing the trust, the vulnerability, the need in her eyes, and he knew that this was more than just a moment of passion. This was something real, something that had been building between them since the moment they met.

He positioned himself above her, his eyes locked on hers as he entered her in one smooth, gentle motion. Maggie gasped, her back arching as she clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders. The sensation of being inside her, of their bodies moving together in perfect harmony, sent a jolt of pleasure through Kane that made him groan against her neck.

They moved together, slowly at first, savoring the connection, the closeness. But the pace quickly escalated, their need for each other driving them to the brink. Maggie's breathy moans filled the tent, mingling with Kane's low groans as they lost

themselves in each other.

It wasn't just about the physical pleasure, though that was undeniable. It was about the bond that had formed between them, the unspoken understanding that they were in this together, no matter what. Kane felt it in every touch, every kiss, every whispered word.

Afterwards, they lay together in silence, the weight of their situation pressing down on them both. Then, slowly, Maggie leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. Kane wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close, feeling the warmth of her body against his. It was a quiet moment of comfort, a brief respite from the chaos that surrounded them.

"You know," Maggie said softly, her voice almost a whisper, "I never told you much about my family. About why I became an archaeologist."

Kane glanced down at her, surprised by the sudden shift in the conversation. "No, you haven't. But I'd like to hear it."

Maggie smiled faintly; her eyes distant as she spoke. "My family... they're ranchers, law enforcement, people who live by a certain code. But I always felt different. I loved history, the stories of the past, the idea that there was so much more to the world than what we could see. My parents were supportive, but I think they never really understood my fascination. They wanted me to stay close, to be safe."

She paused, taking a deep breath. "But then they died. It was a freak accident on the ranch. I was away when it happened, and I never got the chance to say goodbye. After that, I threw myself into my work. I thought that if I could just make a difference, if I could uncover something important, it would all be worth it. But now... now I'm not so sure."

Kane felt a pang of sympathy as he listened to her story, understanding all too well the pain of loss and the drive to make something of it. He had his own ghosts, his own reasons for the choices he had made, and hearing Maggie open up like this made him feel even closer to her.

“I’m sorry, Maggie, but you have the rest of your family,” he said quietly, his voice filled with genuine regret. “I know what it’s like to lose people you care about. It changes you, makes you see the world differently.”

Maggie looked up at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “How do you keep going, Kane? How do you stay strong when everything feels like it’s falling apart?”

Kane met her gaze, feeling a lump form in his throat. “I don’t know if it’s about staying strong. It’s about surviving, about doing what you have to do to get through it. And sometimes, it’s about finding something—or someone—to hold on to.”

Maggie’s expression softened, and she reached up to cup his cheek, her touch gentle and reassuring. “I’m glad you’re here, Kane. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

Kane leaned into her touch, closing his eyes for a moment as he savored the connection between them. “I’m glad I’m here, too, Maggie. And I’m not going anywhere.”

They sat together in the fading light, holding on to each other as the world outside continued to turn. Kane knew that this moment of peace was fleeting, that the storm was still coming, but for now, he let himself be in the present, with Maggie.

The next morning, Kane awoke to the soft light of dawn filtering through the canvas of the tent. Maggie was still asleep beside him, her head resting on his chest, her breathing slow and steady. He lay still, not wanting to disturb her, his mind replaying

the events of the night before.

They had shared more than just their stories. The connection between them had deepened, and as the night wore on, they had found comfort in each other's arms, their fears and doubts melting away in the heat of their passion. It had been more than just physical—it had been a release, an affirmation that they were still alive, still capable of feeling something beyond the constant fear and tension.

Kane brushed a strand of hair away from Maggie's face, his heart aching with a tenderness he hadn't felt in years. He knew that whatever happened next, this moment would stay with him, a bright spot in the darkness.

But the peace was short-lived.

There was a rustling outside the tent, followed by the sound of voices—too many voices, and one in particular that made Kane's blood run cold.

Colonel Carter. Not what they needed. Like Langley, Carter and his men had a bad habit of moving in and out of the dig site. When questioned, the Colonel had explained that this dig was not the only thing they were keeping an eye on.

Kane's body tensed as he gently slid out from under Maggie, careful not to wake her. He quickly dressed, his mind racing as he prepared himself for whatever was coming. The Colonel had been keeping a low profile since the incident with Langley, but Kane had always suspected that there was more to Carter than met the eye.

He stepped outside, his eyes narrowing as he spotted Carter approaching with two armed soldiers at his side. The Colonel's face was set in a grim mask, his eyes cold and calculating.

"Kane," Carter said, his voice clipped and authoritative. "We need to talk."

Kane didn't respond immediately, his gaze flicking to the soldiers before returning to Carter. He could sense the tension in the air, the way the men held their rifles just a little too tightly, their stances a little too rigid.

"What's going on, Carter?" Kane asked, his tone neutral but wary.

Carter didn't waste time with pleasantries. "I've received new orders," he said bluntly. "The artifact is to be secured immediately and transported to a secure location. This dig is over, Chaplin. We're taking control."

Kane's heart sank as the full implication of Carter's words hit him. "Seizing control? What are you talking about? We've worked to secure this artifact, to protect it from falling into the wrong hands."

Carter's eyes narrowed, a dangerous glint in his gaze. "And that's exactly what we're doing. My orders come from above, from people who understand the significance of this find. We can't afford to let it stay here, unprotected. Syria is too unstable."

Kane's mind raced as he processed Carter's words. He had suspected that there was more to this mission, that Carter was playing a different game, but this was worse than he had imagined. If Carter was working for the CIA or worse, for some shadowy organization, the artifact could be used for purposes far more dangerous than they had ever anticipated.

"And what about Maggie?" Kane asked, his voice low and controlled, though his anger was simmering just beneath the surface. "What happens to her?"

Carter's expression didn't change. "Dr. Dillon will be debriefed, of course. She'll be taken care of. You need to follow my orders, Chaplin."

Taken care of. The words sent a chill down Kane's spine. He knew what that

meant—Maggie would be silenced, her work co-opted, her life reduced to nothing more than a footnote in someone else's agenda.

Kane's hand instinctively moved to the sidearm at his belt, his fingers brushing against the cool metal. He had to make a choice, and he had to make it now. He was no longer a member of the military. The only orders he followed now were those issued by Fitzwallace, who had assigned him the task of protecting Maggie. If he needed, Cerberus would move in and extract the whole lot of them despite the cost and regardless of the consequences. His decision was made in an instant.

"No, Carter. I don't take orders from you or whoever it is you really work for," Kane said firmly, his hand resting on the grip of his gun. "You're not taking Maggie or the artifact."

Carter's eyes widened slightly, his soldiers immediately raising their rifles. "Chaplin, think very carefully about what you're doing. This isn't a game."

Kane's gaze hardened. "You're right. It's not. This is about protecting something important, something that doesn't belong in the hands of people like you."

Without waiting for Carter's response, Kane drew his weapon, his movements quick and practiced. He aimed directly at Carter, his finger hovering just above the trigger. "Get out of here, Colonel. Tell your superiors that this dig site is off-limits."

The soldiers hesitated, glancing at each other, unsure of what to do. Carter's face twisted in anger, but he knew better than to push Kane in this moment. The tension was thick, the air charged with the threat of violence.

"Chaplin," Carter hissed, his voice dripping with venom. "You're making a huge mistake."

“Maybe,” Kane replied coldly. “But it’s my mistake to make. Now get out.”

Carter glared at him for a long moment, the tension between them crackling like electricity. Then, with a sharp nod, he gestured to the soldiers. “Stand down. We’re leaving... for now.”

The soldiers lowered their rifles, though their eyes remained on Kane, their expressions wary. Carter turned on his heel, stalking away with his men in tow, leaving Kane standing alone in the early morning light, his heart pounding in his chest.

As the dust settled, Kane let out a slow breath, his grip on his gun relaxing. He knew that this wasn’t the end—that Carter would be back, or someone worse—but for now, he had bought them some time.

He turned back to the tent, his thoughts on Maggie, still inside, unaware of the confrontation that had just taken place. He had made his choice, and now there was no turning back. The mission had changed, the timetable moved up, and his priority was clear.

Protect Maggie. Protect the artifact. No matter the cost.

Chapter Eleven

Maggie

Maggie sat hunched over the artifact, her fingers trembling slightly as she carefully manipulated the ancient device. The markings along its smooth, metallic surface glowed faintly under the dim light of the tent, casting eerie shadows on the walls. Her mind raced as she tried to decipher the final sequence of symbols that would unlock its secrets. She had been working tirelessly for hours, driven by a sense of urgency that had only intensified since Kane's confrontation with Colonel Carter.

Outside, the camp was tense, the air thick with anticipation. Maggie could hear the faint murmur of voices, the occasional rustle of movement as Kane and Sara made their final preparations. But inside the tent, it was just her and the artifact—a relic from a past civilization that held the power to change the course of history.

Maggie's heart pounded in her chest, her thoughts a chaotic jumble of fear, determination, and the knowledge that time was running out. Kane had made it clear that they needed to move quickly. He believed Carter and his men were on the brink of launching an all-out assault to seize the artifact, and Maggie knew that if they succeeded, everything she had worked for would be lost. The artifact would be used for purposes far darker than she had ever imagined, and the consequences could be catastrophic.

"Maggie, how's it going?" Sara's voice crackled through the small radio she had left on the table.

Maggie leaned over, pressing the button to respond. “I’m close, Sara. I just need a little more time. How’s Kane?”

“He’s keeping watch for them.”

“So you think he’s right? That Carter and his men will attack?”

“No doubt in my mind,” said Sara. “But Kane will hold them off; we’re running out of time. If you can’t unlock it, we need to get out of here,” Sara replied, her tone urgent.

Maggie swallowed hard, glancing at the artifact again. It was now or never. “I’ll have it in a few minutes,” she said, her voice firm despite the growing panic inside her. “Just hold them off a little longer.”

Sara didn’t respond, but Maggie knew she would do everything in her power to give her the time she needed. Maggie took a deep breath, focusing all her attention on the artifact. The symbols seemed to pulse in time with her racing heart, their meaning just out of reach. But she couldn’t afford to make a mistake—not now.

With careful precision, Maggie traced her fingers along the sequence of symbols, her mind piecing together the fragments of knowledge she had gathered since her arrival at the dig site. There was a pattern here, a language that had been lost to time, but one that she could now almost understand.

“Come on, come on,” she whispered to herself, her eyes narrowing as she concentrated.

Finally, the last symbol slid into place, and the artifact emitted a soft hum, the glow intensifying. Maggie’s breath caught in her throat as the device began to unfold, revealing a hidden compartment within. Inside, she saw what she had been searching for—a small, intricately detailed crystal, pulsating with an otherworldly energy.

Maggie's hands shook as she reached for the symbol-covered crystal, using a pair of tweezers, her mind racing with the implications of what she had just uncovered. This was it. The key to everything. The artifact wasn't just a relic—it seemed to be some kind of power source, one that might be able to be harnessed for unimaginable purposes.

"Sara," Maggie called into the radio, her voice trembling with a mixture of excitement and fear. "I've got it. I've unlocked the artifact."

There was a brief pause before Sara's voice crackled back through the radio, filled with relief. "Good job, Maggie. Now we need to get that data out of here before they can take it from us. Can you transmit it?"

Maggie nodded, though Sara couldn't see her. "I'm on it. Give me a minute."

Picking up a handheld device, Maggie quickly scanned the crystal in detail and transferred the information to her laptop. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she initiated the data transfer. The screen filled with streams of code and symbols—far more than she had thought she could get with a scan. The scanner whirled and started to crackle before it spit out the last of what it could retrieve and then went silent. Whatever the artifact was, it had overwhelmed the poor thing. Sara had set up a secure server to receive the data, one that was far beyond the reach of Carter and whoever it was that truly pulled his strings.

"Come on, come on," Maggie muttered, her eyes darting between the laptop screen and the tent entrance. Every second felt like an eternity as the data slowly transmitted, the progress bar inching forward with agonizing slowness.

Just as the transfer reached 95%, the ground shook beneath her feet, and Maggie heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire erupting from the far side of the dig site. Her heart lurched as she realized that the assault had begun. Carter's men had made their move.

“Maggie, we’ve got to move!” Sara’s voice was urgent in her ear. “They’re here! We’re under attack!”

“I need just a few more seconds!” Maggie replied, her voice strained as she watched the progress bar inch closer to completion.

She could hear the chaos outside—shouts, the crack of gunfire, the heavy thud of explosions—but she forced herself to stay focused. The data had to be transmitted. It was the only way to ensure that their discovery didn’t fall into the wrong hands.

Finally, the progress bar hit one hundred percent, and the laptop pinged softly, indicating that the transfer was complete. Maggie let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding, her entire body sagging with relief.

“It’s done!” she shouted into the radio, quickly disconnecting the artifact from the laptop. “The data is secure!”

“Good, now get out of there!” Sara ordered; her voice sharp.

Maggie grabbed the crystal and placed it back inside the artifact before stuffing it into her backpack, her hands trembling as she slung it over her shoulder. She was about to rush out of the tent when a loud explosion nearby shook the ground, throwing her off balance. The sound was deafening, and the shockwave sent a cloud of dust and debris flying through the air.

“Maggie!” Kane’s voice crackled through the radio, filled with desperation. “Where are you?”

“I’m coming!” Maggie shouted back, coughing as she staggered to her feet. She had to get to Kane, had to find him in the chaos before it was too late.

She burst out of the tent, the scene before her a nightmare of smoke, fire, and chaos.

Carter's men were everywhere, their dark uniforms blending into the shadows that were beginning to form as they engaged in a fierce firefight with the site's defenders. After their return to the dig site and his confrontation with Carter, Kane had issued firearms to those at the dig who knew how to use them. The air was thick with the smell of burning fuel and gunpowder, and Maggie's heart raced as she scanned the battlefield for any sign of Kane.

"Maggie, over here!" a voice called out, and Maggie turned to see Sara waving frantically from behind a stack of crates. She was crouched low, her rifle held at the ready, her face set in grim determination.

Maggie ran toward her, ducking low as bullets whizzed past her head. She reached Sara just as another explosion rocked the camp, sending a plume of fire and smoke into the sky.

"Where's Kane?" Maggie gasped; her eyes wide with fear.

Sara shook her head, her expression tight. "He's trying to hold off Carter's men near the main gate. We've got to move, Maggie. We need to get you out of here."

"I won't leave without Kane!" Maggie protested, her voice trembling. "I have to find him!"

Before Sara could respond, a group of Carter's soldiers rounded the corner, their rifles trained on them. Sara fired a quick burst, taking down two of them, but there were more coming. Too many.

"We're outnumbered!" Sara shouted, grabbing Maggie's arm. "We've got to go, now!"

Maggie hesitated, her heart torn between the need to find Kane and the reality of their situation. But before she could make a decision, a powerful hand grabbed her from

behind, yanking her backward with brutal force.

She cried out, twisting to see who had grabbed her, but her captor was already dragging her away from Sara, his grip like iron. Maggie struggled, kicking and clawing at the man's arm, but he was too strong. He pulled her into the shadows, away from the battle, until they were hidden behind a half-collapsed wall.

"Let me go!" Maggie shouted, trying to wrench herself free.

The man's grip tightened, and he turned her roughly to face him. Maggie's blood ran cold as she found herself staring into the dark, cruel eyes of the militia leader, the man who had confronted Kane earlier at the dig site. Kane had Cerberus locate and transmit an image of the man to him and had then printed pictures and distributed them to all those involved.

He was tall and imposing, his face hardened by years of battle. A jagged scar ran down the side of his face, and his eyes gleamed with a twisted mix of triumph and malice.

"You're not going anywhere, Dr. Dillon," the man sneered, his voice thick with an accent she couldn't place. "You've caused me a lot of trouble, but it ends here."

Maggie's heart pounded in her chest, fear threatening to overwhelm her. But she forced herself to stay calm, to think. She had to find a way out of this, had to outwit him somehow. She couldn't let him take her—couldn't let him get his hands on the artifact.

"What do you want?" she demanded, her voice shaking only slightly.

The man's eyes flicked to the backpack slung over her shoulder, and a cruel smile curled his lips. "I think you know what I want, Dr. Dillon. Hand over the artifact, and maybe I'll let you live."

Maggie's mind raced, trying to find a way out. She knew she couldn't give him the artifact, couldn't let him have something so powerful, so dangerous. But she also knew that she was outmatched—alone and unarmed against a man who had no qualms about killing.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself. "You think you can just take it?" she asked, her voice steady as she met his gaze. "It's not that simple."

The man's smile faltered, suspicion flickering in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Maggie's mind worked furiously, spinning a lie that she hoped would buy her time. "The artifact is locked," she said, her voice calm and confident. "It's designed to be accessed only by someone who knows the code. Without it, it's just a piece of metal. Useless."

The man's eyes narrowed, and Maggie could see the doubt creeping in. "You're lying."

"Am I?" Maggie challenged, lifting her chin defiantly. "Do you really want to risk it? You could kill me, take the artifact—but then you'll never unlock its secrets. Or, you could let me go, and I'll help you access it."

The man hesitated, his grip on her arm loosening slightly as he considered her words. Maggie's heart raced, knowing she was walking a fine line. If he called her bluff, it could be the end. But if she could just keep him off balance long enough...

Before he could make a decision, a burst of gunfire erupted nearby, followed by a shout. The man's head snapped up, his grip tightening again as he glanced around, clearly agitated.

Maggie took the opportunity to act. She swung her backpack off her shoulder, using it as a weapon to slam into his chest with all her strength. The surprise of the attack

caused him to stumble back, giving Maggie just enough time to twist out of his grasp and run.

KANE

Kane moved with a ferocity he hadn't felt in years, his body operating on pure adrenaline as he fought his way through the militia forces that swarmed the ruins. The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting the desert in deep shadows, but the fight was far from over. His heart pounded in his chest, every breath a raw reminder of how much he had at stake.

Maggie.

The thought of her—alone, vulnerable, somewhere in this warzone—drove him to push harder, faster. He couldn't lose her, not after everything they had been through. The memories of their time together, their connection, the way she had looked at him with trust and affection—dare he call it love—it all fueled his determination. He couldn't let her down.

Kane ducked behind a crumbling wall, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he reloaded his weapon. The sounds of gunfire and shouting filled the air, the chaos of battle all around him. He had faced countless enemies in his time, but this felt different. This wasn't just about survival—it was about protecting his woman, about ensuring that the artifact she had uncovered didn't fall into the wrong hands.

With a quick glance around the corner, Kane spotted a group of militia fighters advancing on his position. He gritted his teeth, his grip tightening on his rifle as he prepared to engage. But before he could move, an explosion rocked the ground, sending a plume of sand and debris into the air. The fighters were thrown off balance, giving Kane the opening he needed.

He moved swiftly, his training kicking in as he took down the first two fighters with

precise, controlled shots. The others scattered, their disorganization a stark contrast to Kane's focused resolve. He advanced, his eyes scanning the ruins for any sign of Maggie. She had to be close—she had to be.

But as he pushed forward, another figure emerged from the shadows... Carter. Kane knew that it wasn't just the local militia. He'd known someone had to be backing them.

The man had a cold, calculated look in his eyes, a twisted smile curling his lips as he stepped toward Kane. He was armed, but it wasn't the gun in his hand that sent a chill down Kane's spine—it was the look of pure, unbridled determination in Carter's eyes. This was a man who had nothing left to lose.

Kane stood in the center of the dig site; his gun aimed steadily at Carter. The air was thick with tension and smoke, filled with the sounds of guns being fired and people screaming and dying. But for Kane, it had narrowed down to just the two of them and their breathing. The two men locked eyes, each one sizing up the other, both aware that this confrontation would only end when one of them was no longer standing.

"You've made a big mistake, Chaplin," Carter said, his voice low and menacing. His own gun was pointed directly at Kane's chest, his finger hovering near the trigger. "You should've stayed out of this—just fucked the pretty archeologist, turned over the artifact, and taken her home. Now you're just another loose end."

Kane tightened his grip on his weapon, his jaw clenched. He could see the cold calculation in Carter's eyes, the ruthlessness of a man who had long since abandoned any semblance of honor. "It's over, Carter. Drop the gun, and maybe I'll let you walk out of here."

Carter's lips curled into a sneer. "You really think you can take me down, Chaplin? You're out of your league."

Before Kane could respond, Carter moved with lightning speed, his leg snapping out to the side. In a blur of motion, Carter knocked Kane's gun from his hand, the weapon falling uselessly to the ground just out of reach.

For a split second, Carter had the upper hand. His gun was already coming up, the barrel aiming directly at Kane's head. Time seemed to slow as Kane's instincts kicked in, adrenaline surging through his veins.

Without hesitation, Kane pivoted on his heel, using the momentum to close the gap between them. As Carter's finger tightened on the trigger, Kane's hand shot out, grabbing Carter's wrist with a crushing grip. The gunshot rang out, the bullet going wide as Kane twisted Carter's arm sharply, forcing him to drop the weapon.

The gun hit the ground with a dull thud—the sand absorbing any sound—and Carter let out a grunt of pain, his face twisted in rage. But Kane didn't give him a chance to recover. With a swift, practiced move, Kane brought his elbow down on Carter's forearm, disarming him completely.

Carter staggered back, his expression a mix of shock and fury. Kane stood over him, his chest heaving, his eyes blazing with cold determination.

"Like I said, Carter," Kane growled, "it's over." Kane turned to retrieve the two guns before finishing this with Carter.

Carter shouldn't have had the strength to get back up, but he was relentless, clamoring to his feet and lunging at Kane. Carter's hand reached for a knife sheathed at his side. Kane saw the glint of steel in the dim light, knew that one wrong move could end everything. With a surge of adrenaline, he turned back to Carter, grabbing his wrist and twisting it with all his strength.

The knife fell to the ground, and Carter let out a snarl of rage. But before he could recover, Kane drove his fist into Carter's throat, the force of the blow sending him

crashing to the ground. Carter gasped for breath, his eyes wide with shock and pain as he clutched at his neck.

Kane stood over him, his chest heaving with the effort it had taken to bring the man down. Carter's eyes flicked to the knife, desperation flashing across his face as he lunged for it one last time. But Kane was faster. He kicked the knife out of reach, his boot resting on Carter's chest to keep him pinned down.

"I said, it's over, Carter," Kane said, his voice cold and final. "Run while you can. I don't know who you're working for, but I guarantee you, without the artifact, they won't come to your aid. But I'll tell you this, Cerberus will find out, and we will destroy them... and you."

Carter's eyes were filled with hatred, but there was also something else—fear. He knew he had lost, and he knew Kane was right. Kane watched as the light began to fade from Carter's eyes, the man's body going limp beneath his boot. It was over. Kane had won. But there was no time to dwell on it—no time to process the victory.

He turned away from Carter's body, his mind already racing ahead. He had to find Maggie. She was out there somewhere, and the battle was still raging around them.

"Maggie!" Kane shouted; his voice hoarse from the fight. He pushed through the ruins, his heart pounding with fear and desperation. "Maggie, where are you?"

He was met with silence, the sounds of the battle receding as he moved deeper into the ruins. Panic gripped him—what if she had been captured? What if he was too late? But he forced himself to keep going, to focus on finding her.

And then he heard it—a faint noise, the sound of footsteps on stone. Kane's heart leaped as he turned a corner, his eyes scanning the shadows. And there she was, emerging from the darkness, her face pale but determined.

“Maggie!” Kane called, relief flooding through him as he ran to her.

“Kane!” Maggie’s voice was filled with emotion as she rushed toward him.

They met in the middle of the ruined dig site, and Kane pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly as if he might lose her if he let go. Maggie clung to him, her body trembling against his, but there was a strength in her embrace that reassured him.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Kane murmured into her hair, his voice thick with emotion.

“Never,” Maggie whispered, pulling back just enough to look up at him. “Never.”

“I love you, Maggie.”

“I love you, too, Kane.”

“That’s all well and good,” said Sara, smiling as she joined them, “but we need to get out of here. The militia will call in reinforcements, and the government is bound to send the army and who knows who else. So can we take this touching reunion and get the hell out of here before we all end up dead?”

Kane grinned. “She has a point.”

Maggie cupped his face in his hands, her thumbs brushing away the dirt that streaked his cheeks. “She does.”

He could see the fear in her eyes, the exhaustion, but also the fierce determination that had brought her this far. “Your brother is going to hate seeing you with my collar around your neck,” Kane said.

“Then he can wear a blindfold instead of putting it on Pippa.”

Sara shook her head. "I don't even want to know what you two are talking about, but can we leave now?"

Before Kane could respond, a noise behind them made him turn sharply. His eyes widened as he saw Carter, battered and bloodied, staggering to his feet. The man's face was a mask of rage and desperation, his hand reaching for a hidden gun.

"Get down!" Kane shouted, pushing Maggie and Sara behind him as he prepared to face Carter one last time.

But before Carter could pull the trigger, a shot rang out, echoing through the ruins. Kane froze, his breath catching in his throat as he watched Carter's body jerk, the gun slipping from his fingers as he collapsed to the ground, a bullet hole in his chest.

Kane turned, his heart pounding, to see Maggie standing behind him, her hands steady on the pistol she had just fired. Her eyes were hard, her face set in a grim expression as she lowered the weapon.

"It's over," she said softly, her voice filled with both relief and sadness.

Kane nodded, his gaze shifting to Carter's lifeless body. It was over. The man who had threatened everything they held dear was gone, and they were still standing.

The sound of helicopters approaching broke the silence, their rotors chopping through the air as they appeared on the horizon.

"I called in the Cerberus strike team," said Sara.

"How?" said Kane, noticing a difference in her accent. It was no longer Syrian, but Irish.

She grinned at him, recognizing that he'd heard the difference. "Sara Gray. I'm with

Cerberus in London. Fitz picked up some chatter about the artifact and has had the strike team on standby ever since.”

Sara was right. The choppers were from Cerberus. The cavalry had arrived, just in time to see the end of the battle. As the helicopters landed, kicking up a cloud of dust around them, Kane and Sara went to the choppers, helping the others from the dig site board before Kane stepped onto the one with Maggie. The roar of the engines filled the air as the fully-armed and stealth-equipped choppers lifted off as Kane settled into the seat beside Maggie, his hand still holding hers, their fingers intertwined.

The desert receded below them as the helicopters rose into the air and banked away from the smoldering dig site, carrying them away from the ruins, away from the battle that had nearly claimed their lives. But the future that awaited them was just as uncertain, just as dangerous. They were the custodians of a discovery that might be able to change the world, and the responsibility weighed heavily on them both.

Kane looked at Maggie, seeing the determination in her eyes, the strength that had brought them this far. They had survived the battle, but the war was far from over. The world was a dangerous place, and the artifact they had uncovered held the potential to make it even more so. But Kane and Maggie had each other, and as long as they stood together, they could face whatever came next.

As the helicopter carried them away, leaving the desert behind, Kane held Maggie close, ready to face whatever the future had in store.

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