

BOOK 1 OF THE TIME GUARDIAN SAGA

TIMEKEY

OF THE

ANASAZI

BRYAN GAFFERT

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To my parents, who always encouraged me to follow my own path.

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1 SHARDS AND SHADOWS

I might as well admit it: my attempt to win today's treasure hunt was doomed from the start. My best friend, Allie Coleman, shouldn't have stood a chance against me. She moved here several years ago from someplace cold up in Canada; what would she know about finding the Anasazi Indian artifacts in the American Southwest?

When you're raised on the desert's edge like I was, with nothing behind your house but miles of winding canyons and pueblo ruins to explore, it only takes a little imagination to hear the breezes whisper to you about a long-forgotten civilization. That's when the treasure hunting bug gets into your blood. My whole family's like that: Granddad, Mom, and I are three generations of explorers in search of secrets from the past. Mom's even kind of famous for it: the newspapers call her "Dr. Anna Reed, the 'Indiana Jane' archeologist of the Anasazi."

You'd think all that would add up to an easy win for me versus Allie-from-the-Great-White-North. Not even. The way that girl could zero in on the good stuff so quickly made me want to pull my hair out.

We had headed out this morning like most of our summer vacation days: hiking down into the state park behind Granddad's property to see who could collect the best pieces. Allie was as chipper as always, leading the way along the path down to the canyon floor, humming as she scanned the ground ahead.

But as much as I wanted to beat her at her own game, I couldn't focus on uncovering pottery shards. For the past week, I'd been dogged by a feeling of being watched -- and it was especially strong today. The maze of canyons that used to be so familiar to me seemed to press in from all sides as I followed Allie down into the wild. The hairs on my neck were standing up -- I swear I could feel someone's eyeballs boring into my back. I'd glance behind me every now and then to find absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. No matter what I tried, my mind kept distracting me with these stupid thoughts. This was *not* going to help me win.

I've got to stop watching too many murder mysteries, I thought. Seriously -- what kind of crook would want to waste his time stalking Eliot Reed, a second-year student at Washington Middle School in a no-name town in the middle of New Mexico? Dumb as that sounded, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was shadowing us on our collecting trip.

Shielding my eyes from the bright sky, I peered into the switchbacks that zigzagged all the way to the top of the mesa where we had started the day's trip. The walls shimmered in the heat. Did something move up there? Or had I been fooled by a wavering mirage? It wouldn't be the first time; the intense light of the desert can play tricks on your mind.

"See? I told you." Allie's voice brought my attention back from scanning the sandstone cliffs high above us.

"Huh? Told me what?" I looked down to see her using a soft brush on a hump of dirt on the ground. Her sweeping kicked up a mini cloud of thousand-year-old dust that tickled my nose.

"Score!" She whisked away more layers of earth, exposing a number of pottery pieces. The white clay fragments painted with fine black lines stood out against the darker sandstone.

A groan escaped me before I could stop myself. She had found *another* artifact. Again. "Not bad," I said behind my camera so she couldn't see me grinding my teeth. I busied myself by taking a picture of the cleared mound and recording its GPS coordinates, just like Mom had taught me. "What do you think we've got here? I'd guess a decent sized bowl. Got to be a good ten inches across."

Allie glanced up from her find and gave her smile that always means trouble. “What do you mean, *we’ve* got? This was all mine. You need to start focusing. I bet I’ve uncovered a complete plate or bowl, but you spend the entire day and can only come up with a few shards? You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Day’s not over. Remember when I found that mug in perfect condition? Same thing could -- *Hey!*” I caught a flash at the extreme edge of my vision. “You see that?”

“What? What’s the matter?” she asked, looking around.

“There!” I pointed up the trail behind us. “I’m sure I saw light reflecting off something up there, like from someone’s binoculars.” I lifted my binoculars again to scour the area.

She cocked her head. “Yea, so? Why wouldn’t other people be out for a hike? Or maybe it’s a park ranger who hasn’t seen our collecting permits and wants to see what we’re up to.” She waved her permit tag above her head in a slow arc to make it easy to spot.

I could feel my face turn red. “Yea, I guess that makes sense.” Why was I being so paranoid? No reason to jump at shadows.

“What’s this *really* all about?” Allie asked with a smirk. “You’re trying to distract me from the fact that I’ve beaten you again?” She raised her right hand to her forehead, her fingers in the shape of an *L*.

At that moment, I would’ve given anything to be able to call *her* the loser. “Don’t you wish,” I shot back. “You stick with your broken bowl. I’m heading up the hill near that old pueblo site. I’ll meet you back here in a bit with a *real* prize.”

She had already turned back to her work. “Luck with that; you’ll need it.”

The game was back on. I had to find something amazing to bring home or I’d never shut her up. One last glance behind me didn’t reveal any creature skulking after us, so I grabbed my pack and headed up a hill toward an ancient pueblo ruin we had visited last summer.

* * *

An hour later, I had to admit defeat. Although I'd found a few bits and pieces, they were nothing as cool as Allie's bowl. I tossed my pack into the only available shade under a rock overhang and trudged over to it, squatting down next to where it lay. This sucked. A hot, grimy day and what did I get to look forward to? Another one of Allie's stupid victory dances.

It wasn't fair. I shouldn't even have to be here. I could be doing *real* archaeology with Mom. If only she'd let me go with her to the dig site like I'd asked her, I could be working on the most awesome artifacts right now. I pictured us sitting around a campfire under the stars, talking about what we had found that day and just relaxing together.

Of course, getting *any* time with Mom meant visiting her dig site. She wasn't ever home. But no matter how I tried to convince her that I was old enough to help her team, the answer was no. *Sorry, you can't come*, she'd told me. *Everything's up in the air because of this skeleton we've uncovered, not to mention the amazing artifacts we found with it. We're scrambling to make sense of it, my schedule's shot, and I can't afford to have anyone get distracted with a kid hanging around right now. I'll bring you out later this summer for a day or two after I've got the project back firing on all cylinders, okay?* And that was that. In a repeat of every previous summer, I'd been left behind to scrounge for pottery pieces with Allie while Mom got to dust off a mummy. Who wouldn't be torked off?

My watch told me I'd also fallen behind my own schedule for today. I took a long drink of water from my canteen, closed up my pack, and then hiked back down to Allie to help her search for any remaining fragments. "We better get a move on," I said as we took the trail that led out of the canyon. "I told Granddad I'd be back by now, and you know how he gets." I checked my cell phone, but the cliffs blocked the signal. I couldn't tell him about being late until I was almost home.

"Stop worrying," Allie said. "I'll show him my new bowl and he'll lose all track of time." She patted her backpack where all the fragments had been carefully stowed.

"You're right about that," I said. "He'll love them. At the rate you're

going, your collection will be as big as his pretty soon.”

Allie shook her head with a smile. “Nuh-uh. I’m not keeping this one. Dad’s birthday is next month, and it’s going to be the best present ever. Hey, you think your grandfather would help me reassemble it?” she asked with her deep blue eyes all lit up.

“Why ask me?” I said with a scowl. “I’m not a mind-reader. Go ask him yourself. Now hurry up, or I’m going to be in even bigger trouble.” Her going on about her dad stung even though I knew she didn’t mean anything by it. I ignored her hurt look and hustled up the trail to put some distance between us.

She could yammer all day about her fantastic dad and what they did together, but I sure didn’t need to hear it. Why should I? I never knew my dad. I had no memories of him, no birthday of his to celebrate. I’d never get to go camping with him or anything else that fathers and sons are supposed to do.

* * *

Allie and I climbed up out of the canyonlands and onto the back of Granddad’s property just as the sun was about to set. Having that old ramshackle house come into view at the end of our hike was enough to push away the unease that had been dogging me all day. We spent a minute catching our breaths, leaning against the gnarled bristlecone pine tree that marked the edge of Granddad’s land. We looked back at the sea of sandstone cliffs we’d left behind: one flat mesa top rose behind another all the way to the horizon, laid out like a thousand plates on a giant’s smorgasbord table.

“How’re you doing these days, old one? Still enjoying these sunsets?” Allie said softly, patting the bark of the bristlecone that had been worn smooth from centuries of wind and sand.

“You sound just like Granddad,” I said. “He talks to that tree all the time.”

She looked up into its twisted branches. “You’ve got to admire anything that stands the test of time for so long. Not to mention that it’s all alone -- didn’t your grandfather say the next closest tree of its kind is a good 100 miles away? Poor thing could use some company.”

“Whatever you say.”

Allie cleared her throat. “Anyway... Eliot, I’m sorry if I hit a sore spot. I didn’t think... You know... Your dad...” Her voice trailed off.

I grunted. “Don’t know what you mean. I’m just sitting here, watching you talk to a tree before Granddad hands me more chores for being late. And it’s your fault, because of all the pieces of that bowl of yours,” I said as I glanced over at her with a grin to make things okay.

“Jerk,” she said, punching me in the arm. “That’s not going to get you out of losing. Again.” She gave the tree one last pat, then stood up and tossed her backpack over one shoulder. “Come on, let’s make a grand entrance and I’ll dazzle your grandfather with my latest prize.”

We ambled up the gentle slope that led us around the long side of the house toward the front porch. Granddad had built the place himself. What started out as a small two-room cabin had evolved into a narrow, single-story ranch house with a big front porch, a series of mismatched windows, and several additions that seemed to have grown out of the back like mushrooms.

As we approached the front yard, we could see a shiny vehicle that stood out in stark contrast to the dusty landscape that made up Granddad’s property: a sheriff’s car. We gawked at each other for a second, and then we dashed up onto the porch and burst through the door.

“Granddad! Granddad!” My first thought was something had happened to him, but I breathed a huge sigh of relief to see him talking with someone in a sheriff’s uniform and another man in a fancy suit.

Granddad dashed over and grabbed me with both arms. “Eliot! Where’ve you been? You were supposed to be home two hours ago!” He was more upset than I’d ever seen him.

“I had to help Allie,” I explained, gesturing toward her in hopes of directing Granddad’s attention away from me. “It took a while, but I think

we've got a complete bowl."

"Ah, yes -- Allie," Granddad said, turning to her. "Sorry about being abrupt, but we've got a family emergency. Can you call your folks and have someone pick you up?"

Allie nodded silently, her face filled with worry. She fished her cell phone out of her pack and made a short call. "Mom's on her way," she said. "I'll meet her at the end of your drive." She squeezed my arm. "Call me in the morning," she said in a low voice before slipping outside.

"You might not have time for her tomorrow," Granddad told me as soon as Allie closed the door. He pressed me into the closest living room chair, then sat down next to me. "Son, there isn't any easy way to tell you this, so I'm going to give it to you straight. It's... about your mother. I'm afraid she's gone missing in the desert."

2 MISSING

My stomach turned over. “What do you mean, *missing*? What happened? Is she dead?” I tried to keep my voice steady as I scanned Granddad’s and the two strangers’ faces for clues.

“We don’t know,” the heavy-set officer said. He had a thick scar on his forehead that connected his bushy eyebrows together into a single line. “That’s why we’re here. I’m Sheriff Doyle, in charge of this case.” He nodded in the direction of the well-dressed man. “And I expect you know your mother’s boss, Dr. Nasarus, who’s come from the university to help.”

“Uh, no; I don’t think we’ve met,” I said. I sure would’ve remembered this guy. His thin lips curled up into a smile, but the look he gave me with those huge black eyes sliced right through me. He might as well have been examining an insect before sticking a pin through its body.

“So young for such heartache,” Dr. Nasarus said, sighing deeply and shaking his head. “I can’t *begin* to tell you how much this whole situation pains me. I’m here to offer my condolences in person and to ensure Sheriff Doyle gets all the assistance he needs.”

“*Thank you*, Dr. Nasarus.” The sheriff gestured for Dr. Nasarus to stand aside. He pulled a chair out from the dining table, swiveled it around to face me, sat down, and opened his notepad. “We’re collecting information from everyone who was in contact with your mother. We’ve talked with

the research team and your grandfather, and now I need to ask you a few questions. Are you okay with that?"

I nodded and held my hands tightly together in my lap. I hoped he didn't notice them shaking.

"Good. According to all accounts at the dig site," he said, scanning his notes, "Dr. Reed was last seen on Sunday at about 8 P.M. At least three other people saw her go into her tent for the evening around then. So far, no one has reported seeing her since. Have you had any contact with your mother after that?" he asked, his pencil set at the ready on a fresh page in his notepad.

I shook my head. "No, but hang on -- you're saying Mom disappeared on Sunday? That's four days ago! What happened? Why'd it take so long for anyone to tell us?"

Sheriff Doyle sat back in the chair and scratched his unibrow scar with the eraser end of his pencil. "It appears the team thought Dr. Reed was working in another section of the site, so they didn't realize she'd gone missing for a while. Then they had to drive into town to contact the authorities. Once they filed the missing persons report, we started our preliminary work. Which brings me here," he said, tapping his pad. "Back to my question: when was the last time you saw your mother or talked to her?"

"Um, Mom left here to go to the new dig site about three weeks ago." My left heel bounced rapidly up and down with a will of its own. I pushed down on my knee, trying to keep the nervous energy under wraps.

"Can you be more specific? What day, and approximately what time?"

"Yea, it was a Wednesday, three weeks ago yesterday. I remember because she dropped me off at school that morning. I got to class early, around quarter to eight."

"Excellent, that's good detail," Sheriff Doyle said as he jotted down more notes. "What about more recent contact? Your mother left three weeks ago and hasn't been back. I assume you talk on the phone? E-mail? Mail? Is there any schedule for calls?"

“Not really. She’s really busy running the excavations, so I only get to talk with her once in a while. There’s no cell signal out at the site, you know. Same problem with e-mail -- no Internet access. She just calls when she’s in town to pick up supplies.”

“So when did you last talk with her?”

I crinkled my forehead. “She called us on Friday, at dinner time. Maybe 7:30?”

The sheriff finished adding notes and put his pen down. “This is really important, Eliot. Think hard about that last phone call. I need all the specifics you can give me about what your mother said to you. Even the most trivial piece of information could help us.”

I nodded.

“Good. Start whenever you’re ready.”

I pictured the last talk I had with Mom. Although it had meant nothing special at the time, this boring phone call suddenly became the most important conversation of my life. “There wasn’t anything really unusual. The dig was going well and not so well. She mentioned she’d broken her GPS device and had sent it in for repair, which slowed her down some. And she told me they were behind schedule mostly because they were studying a skeleton with some really unusual artifacts in a new section of the site.”

Dr. Nasarus snapped to attention when I mentioned the skeleton. “*Excellent!* And what else did she say? What did she do with these new discoveries? What can you tell me about them? Where’d she put them?” He loomed over me, his hands gripping my chair’s armrests.

“You can’t be serious,” Granddad said. “We don’t give a toss about your artifacts. My daughter’s gone missing in the desert! Will you stop asking irrelevant questions and *do something?*”

Sheriff Doyle scowled, making the scar stand out on his forehead. “We’re all on the same team, Mr. Reed. And I’ll remind you, Dr. Nasarus, this is *my* investigation, not yours. Kindly leave the questioning to me.” He pointed a finger at an empty chair and gestured for Dr. Nasarus to sit.

I'd never heard Granddad lose it like that. His skin looked too pale. A sheen of sweat glistened on his nose, but I didn't think it was from the heat. Mom's disappearance must've been too much to handle. Picturing him lying in the hospital made my stomach clench. I had to get him calmed down before he had a stroke or something. "It's okay," I said, squeezing his hand. "We'll find Mom. How can we help?" I asked the sheriff. "What can I do?"

"Thanks, Eliot. Right now we need information. Was there anything else you talked about during that last call?"

I pried my eyes away from Nasarus' stare which hadn't let up since I mentioned the skeleton. "Uh, not much. She asked about school and if things were going okay with my classes. I said fine. She said I'd get a new artifact puzzle to work on during the summer if my grades were good. That's about it."

"Artifact puzzle?"

"Yea, that's what Mom calls it when she has Granddad and me help put together pottery shards and stuff. I'm pretty good at matching pieces, and Granddad's an expert at reassembling them back together."

The sheriff absently tapped his pen against his pad. "I see. You sure she mentioned nothing else?"

"No, aside from her asking how Granddad was doing. That's all, as far as I remember."

Sheriff Doyle flipped his notepad closed and pushed himself up from his chair with a grunt. "I still have nothing that explains Dr. Reed's disappearance," he told Granddad. "But try not to worry. I've got two search and rescue teams performing a full sweep of the lands around the excavation site. If she's out there, we'll find her, one way or another."

Finally, something I could do to help! I launched myself out of my chair. "I'll join the search team! Let me get my pack." But Granddad snagged me before I got more than three steps.

"Oh no, you don't," Granddad said. "I need you to stay home. What if something happens to you as well?"

"Don't be so hasty," Dr. Nasarus said. "Weren't you telling us earlier about how skilled this lad is with finding things in the desert, Mr. Reed? He seems a competent boy to me. Why not let him join?"

"That's *enough*, Dr. Nasarus," Sheriff Doyle said. "You have no authority here, and you certainly aren't helping by getting the boy's hopes up. Mr. Reed is correct -- search and rescue isn't for kids. It can be grueling, especially out in the canyonlands." He shook a warning finger at Granddad. "That goes for you, too, Mr. Reed; leave this to the professionals. The best thing you can both do is stay put." He placed a business card on the dining table. "Here's my card and contact information. Can you come down to the station tomorrow to fill out some forms?"

Granddad nodded but said nothing.

"Right. I'll leave you for tonight. See you tomorrow." He nodded to us, then gestured for Nasarus to head out the door with him to his car.

Nasarus pulled Granddad aside. "This card has my direct line at the university. Call me the moment you get any information about Dr. Reed or her work. Rest assured the university is doing everything it can to help find her." He gave me one last smile, then swept out of the room after Sheriff Doyle.

I followed them onto the porch and watched the brake lights fade into the dark. The property fell silent. I stood on the deck, seething. *Professional or not, I should have been put on that search and rescue team*, I told myself. I bet I knew more about desert survival than half of that rescue team. Besides, I had an advantage over them -- I knew my mother. If anyone could figure out where she'd gone, I could. At least Dr. Nasarus thought I'd be able to handle myself out there; nice thing for such a strange person to say. But Granddad was the real challenge. Convincing him to let me go out to search for Mom would be like climbing Mt. Everest.

I went back inside and found Granddad seated at the dining room table, staring at the two business cards in front of him. He looked like he'd aged ten years from this morning, so frail and troubled. No wonder. This all

seemed unreal, like a horrible nightmare that should fade away in the morning. But our visitors had left something behind to make sure we knew the truth -- Doom's bright white calling cards sat on our dining table.

* * *

Neither Granddad nor I had any appetite for food or conversation. We wandered silently from room to room, sitting down in one spot only to rise as soon as dark thoughts crept in and forced us to move again. The house that had always been so welcoming no longer felt safe. No matter how many lights I turned on, the place seemed full of shadows and uncertainty. A chill had settled in my heart that no amount of light could banish.

Granddad eventually settled himself back at the dining table. After tapping on the sheriff's card for several minutes, he seemed to make up his mind about something. "Eliot, I'm going to bed. I'm thinking of paying the university a visit first thing in the morning. Maybe someone there can point us in the right direction. Then I'll stop by the sheriff's office on the way home to deal with the paperwork -- and report on anything the people at the Archaeology Department can come up with. But what about you? Will you be okay by yourself? I could take you with me, but I don't want to drag you through more of this nightmare than we have to."

That wasn't a tough choice. The drive from home to Four Corners University would normally take about two hours, but with Granddad behind the wheel, it would be more like three grueling hours of dust and heat while we crawled across the desert in a wheezing pickup with no air conditioning. All in all, staying home was a much better deal. "I'll be fine," I said. "Allie told me to call her. Can I have her come over here tomorrow?"

"Of course. Company will do you good. Just make sure her folks know I'll be out for the day. Go over to her place if you need to, but remember to call me if you leave so I know where you are."

I nodded and shuffled down the hall to my bedroom, dragging my backpack behind me. Too drained to do anything else, I pulled off my shoes, shirt, and pants, dropped them into a heap, then crawled into bed with my phone. I must've called Mom's mobile phone twenty times, but I couldn't even leave a message -- her voicemail was full. Still, hearing that distant ring let me pretend that we were still connected together, as if we were using two tin can phones. If I pulled hard enough on the connecting string, I could draw her straight to me. But her phone just rang and disconnected.

Sleep didn't come easily. I couldn't stop worrying about where Mom was or if she was even alive. I lay there for hours, staring into the dark, wondering when I last told her I loved her.

3 THE ARTIFACT PUZZLE

I woke to the smell of bacon. The scent of Granddad's cooking got my stomach growling in spite of the heaviness in my heart. The cheery morning light kept telling me everything should be fine, that Mom could walk through the front door at any moment. Maybe she would. But what if she didn't? I couldn't lay in bed all day. Spying my phone on the nightstand reminded me that Allie still didn't know what was going on, so I rang her cell. She was totally speechless when I told her the news about Mom.

"Oh my gosh! Your mom -- I'm so sorry." Her voice choked up. "What're you going to do?"

"I don't know. They won't let me *do* anything. I can't join the search and rescue team; I'm just a kid who'll get in the way. Even Granddad's helping: he's going to meet the sheriff and talk to people at the university while I'm stuck in this empty house. I've got to get out of here. You want to do something?"

"Sure, anything. How about another pottery hike to take your mind off things?"

For once, collecting shards with her sounded pretty good. We made plans to meet up for lunch. My stomach couldn't be ignored any longer, so I followed my nose to the kitchen and took a seat at the breakfast bar.

True to form, Granddad was tackling his problems by cooking.

Breakfasts were his specialty. He set a plate full of breakfast awesomeness in front of me: flapjacks, eggs, and bacon, with a pitcher of warm maple syrup. “Dig in,” he said as he settled on the stool next to me with his own impressive plate. “A man’s got to eat. We’re not going to get anything done running on empty. So have you worked out if you’re doing something with Allie today?”

“Yeah, I called her a second ago. We’re going to meet in the canyons for lunch, then we’ll spend the afternoon looking for pottery, if that’s okay. Sitting here waiting for Mom will drive me crazy,” I said as I used a flapjack wedge to sop up syrup from the edge of my plate.

Granddad grunted his approval and helped himself to more meat.

* * *

While Granddad cleaned up the remains of our breakfast, I packed a couple of lunches -- one for him to take on his drive out to the university, and another for my hike. “I hope you don’t mind a cheese, lettuce, and tomato sandwich,” I said as I pulled ingredients from the fridge.

Granddad shook his head, but I caught the twinkle in his eyes. “Making another delivery run, huh? Sounds like your packrat dictates more of my lunch than I get to. That critter won the food lottery with you. Has he turned into the shape of a pumpkin from all the snacks you bring him?”

“Mooch might be a little softer on the edges than the average packrat,” I said with a grin as I tossed cheese bits and bread crusts into a plastic bag, “but he’s got a big family to feed. They just had a new litter of seven. Allie’s going to meet me at their nest. I’ll head out a little early so I’ve got some time to feed them.” I cut off the tops of a bunch of carrots and added the greens to the packrat lunch bag.

“Fine, fine. Just don’t get so distracted with your critters or Allie that you’re late getting home.” His face turned serious as he pocketed the truck keys. “This mess about your mom is bad enough. Be back home before I get here so I don’t have to worry about you too, promise?” He pulled me

into a quick embrace and then hefted his lunchbox. “Thanks for the road meal -- it’ll tide this old man over until I get back. Which should be well before dark. You stay out of trouble and I’ll see you here for dinner.”

I waved goodbye from the porch. I was about to head back inside when I noticed a Postal Service van heading up the drive. I hung around to see what Mr. Romero, our mail carrier since the beginning of time, would bring us today.

“Morning, Eliot,” Mr. Romero said as he sorted through a bin of mail. “Was that your grandfather in the pickup? Didn’t realize he could still drive.”

“Hi, Mr. Romero. Uh, yea, that was Granddad all right. He’s fine behind the wheel. I think.”

“Not a problem,” he said with a wink. “I saw nothing. Anyway, here’s your mail, but hang on -- I’ve got a package for ya, too.” He poked his head into the back of the van and returned a minute later with a small box addressed to Granddad. *In Mom’s writing.*

My heart went into overdrive. I mumbled a quick thanks and took everything inside. I sat down at the dining table, my hands clutching the package, staring at that familiar handwriting. The box tingled under my fingers, taunting me to open it. The route that Granddad was taking to the university meant he wouldn’t have cell phone service for at least an hour. Maybe something in this package could explain what had happened to Mom. Maybe she needed my help. Maybe every minute counted.

I grabbed the scissors from the kitchen junk drawer and sliced through the wrapping tape, then stuck my fingers down through the wrapping. Grasping onto something smooth and hard, I pulled out Mom’s old GPS device. Strange. In that last phone call I had with her, she’d told me it was broken and that she sent it off to be repaired. So why did she send it home? I hit the power button and the device instantly came to life with a *bleep*. It worked fine for me. I powered it back off and checked the box for anything else. A slip of folded note paper with *DAD* printed in my mom’s block lettering on the outside turned out to be the only other thing. I sifted through the packing material to make sure I’d missed nothing else, but nada

-- Mom hadn't sent any note for me. So I opened Granddad's note.

"Dad," the note began in a messy version of Mom's writing, "I don't have a lot of time. Something really weird is going on at the dig site. I can't trust anyone, so I'm sending this home for safekeeping. Don't worry, I'll likely be home before this finds its way to you anyway, so you'll probably never even read my note. But just in case, make sure NO ONE knows you've got my GPS device. Not even Eliot. I told him I sent it in for repairs, so stick to that story. If he knew the truth, he might try to use it to go searching on his own and get into real danger. This is important, Dad. You've got to be sure no one knows you have it. I'll explain later when I've got time; just please keep this well hidden so no one gets in trouble. Love you! -A"

I sat dumbfounded, staring at the paper I held in my hands. I scanned the note three times, trying to make sense of what it meant. When your mother writes something this bizarre and disappears the next day, the chance that they're connected is pretty good. But why did Mom sound like she was in a James Bond movie? She was an archaeologist, not a CIA spy. What was with all the secrecy? She even wanted to keep *me* in the dark. What was so important about an old GPS device? Most of all, *where was she?*

Wait. Something just clicked. Mom mentioned my using the device to search for something. I dropped the note, grabbed the GPS, and hit the power switch.

Bleep. The screen flashed on, showing the number of GPS satellite signals it could pick up. I toggled through the different screens to see what clues I could find. Area map page, nothing special there. Altimeter page, no thanks. Current location page, of course. Waypoints page -- that could be interesting. I scanned the waypoint list to see what locations Mom had saved: HOME, SITE, UNVSTY, and AFTPZL. HOME was easy: that showed a pin dropped at our house. SITE marked her dig site in the desert, and UNVSTY turned out to be nothing more than her Archaeology building at Four Corners University. That left AFTPZL, the last entry whose label didn't ring any bells. Its location was much closer to home than anywhere near her dig site. In fact, the map showed this spot as being

just one canyon over from Mooch's nest.

With Granddad away all day and the search and the rescue team not wanting my help, it was up to me to go and find out what was at this GPS spot. I checked the clock. If I hightailed it out of here, I could scout the area before meeting Allie at Mooch's nest.

Excitement surged through me -- I had a plan! I dashed down the hall to my room and tossed my phone, binoculars, flashlight, compass, and Mom's GPS unit and note into my backpack. Pausing at the kitchen to add the lunch bags and a water bottle to my pack, I was out the door and on my way to help rescue Mom.

* * *

I took the main trail from the back of Granddad's place down into the canyonlands. Not another soul moved. The landscape appeared as still a photograph, except for three buzzards circling high overhead. That suited me fine. Nothing like hot, clean air under a brilliant sky to clear your mind. Mom's disappearance felt just as raw now as it did earlier, but knowing I was doing something about it kept me going.

I pulled out the GPS when I reached the side canyon where Mooch lived. Sure enough, the AFTPZL waypoint showed up on the map as a flag icon one canyon over. I remembered exploring that side canyon a couple of years ago. Not easy to get into, since you had to pick your way across a field of boulders at the entrance. And not that interesting, either -- no Indian ruins or pottery to draw me back. Yet maybe this out-of-the-way spot held the answer to what had happened to Mom.

I pocketed the GPS and cinched my pack tight against my back. Using my hands and feet, I scrambled my way up and over the pile of rock that closed off the entrance to the side canyon. The opposite side of the scree pile sloped gently to the ground. The place didn't look any different from my last visit: a small, narrow side canyon about twenty feet wide and close to a hundred feet deep. Rocks littered the floor, especially near the back

where they'd been pushed over the mesa top after a rare rainstorm. Other than that, the place was empty.

I hopscotched down the rocks until I landed on the canyon floor. Sweat stung my eyes. I checked my watch. Not even 11 A.M. yet, and the weather was already scorching. My hands shook from dehydration. I glanced around at the natural enclosure I'd climbed into. No one knew where I was. I might never be found if I got hurt doing something stupid out here.

So much for following the desert survival rules I was supposed to know so well. I forced myself to rest for a couple of minutes while I guzzled water from my pack. The icy liquid slid down my throat, spreading its coolness throughout my overheated body. I splashed my face and rubbed my wet hands over my arms. The sudden cold shock gave me goosebumps. Feeling better, I pocketed my water bottle and checked the GPS.

The display's AFTPZL flag seemed to be about thirty feet away, somewhere against the canyon wall to my left. I made a beeline there, my footsteps echoing softly in the still air. My eyes flicked between the display and the ground, tracking the shrinking distance to the flag as I headed closer to the wall. When I had just one step to go before I'd hit the wall, *Bleep!* -- the machine announced I'd arrived.

Arrived at what? I pocketed the GPS and took a careful look around. I checked the ground, but I didn't see any markings or footprints. *Of course not*, I told myself with a sigh; *that'd be too easy*. The bunch of stones littering the ground had been flung over the cliff top from a flash flood, and that meant the entire canyon floor might get washed out during a rainstorm. Mom would know this better than me, so she must have stashed whatever AFTPZL was somewhere higher up. I ran my hand over the rough surface of the canyon wall above me. Nothing unusual.

I stepped back a few feet so I could scan a larger area. Wait -- *there*. One rock didn't belong: a light-colored chunk of sandstone just above my head stood out from the darker cliff wall. It had been jammed into a wide horizontal crack. I reached up with both hands and tugged. It moved! I slid the stone out of the crack and looked it over. Nothing special.

Dropping the stone, I stood on my tiptoes and ran my fingers along the crack, feeling for anything that might have been hidden behind the stone on the ledge. My right hand touched something smooth. I grabbed onto whatever it was and pulled it out. My heartbeat ramped back up when I saw I'd found a clear plastic storage bag that held two bundles of bubble wrap and a spiral-bound notebook with the words *DIG SITE JOURNAL 13HH-7, DR. ANNA REED, FOUR CORNERS UNIVERSITY* on its cover.

Bingo! I had about half an hour before I had to meet Allie at Mooch's nest, which was only about fifteen minutes from here. Plenty of time to check this stuff out first. I settled onto the canyon floor, leaned back against the wall, and opened the notebook.

The date on the top of the first page was from three weeks ago, when Mom left home to return to the dig site. She described organizing the latest work session and confirming team members; nothing important. I flipped through the pages to find her most recent notes, which turned out to be about half-way through. I whispered her words out loud, as if she were talking to me:

June 3, at the dig site.

People have been acting strangely ever since we uncovered the skeleton and these amazing artifacts. The skeleton is of a woman in traditional Pueblo II period Anasazi garb who I estimate has been dead for 1,000 years. I've sent clothing and tissue samples back to the lab for carbon dating to confirm age. Clearly her death was suspicious. The notch we found on a rib appears to be from a knife-thrust. That, along with what may be blood stains on the front of her tunic and a matching dark spot on the ground indicate foul play. But no other bodies anywhere. No sign of a raid or battle with multiple bodies and weaponry. Nothing at all like that. But if she was attacked as an individual, why? One would think robbery, but why were the artifacts left with her? You'd expect those would be the first things taken. They appear to be wholly unrelated to any part of the Anasazi culture -- what kind of metal-working is documented in 11th century Four Corners? We've got so many questions with

this find, but so far no good answers.

The next few entries were short descriptions about how the team was getting nowhere trying to figure out the artifacts. I scanned ahead until I found her last entry, written the day before she vanished:

June 20, at the dig site.

Something very wrong is going on here, but I'm not sure who all is involved. I've seen someone with binoculars watching the camp. Then there were the strange sounds in the night. But ransacking my tent when I was getting supplies in town is their boldest move yet. I can't be certain, but this seems to have started after my last call to Dr. Nasarus. He was beyond excited -- almost frantic -- when I described the artifacts. He wanted me to send them and all my notes to his lab right away, but I said we were still making preliminary assessments here for at least the next week. And ever since then I've had unwanted attention from persons unknown.

Whoever it is, I'm sure they're after these priceless artifacts. We haven't yet released any details about our find, outside of the immediate team and Dr. Nasarus. That means at least one of them here has to be involved. I can't trust anyone. I'm going to find a safe place away from camp to hide the artifacts. Then I'll see if I can draw our thief out of the shadows and into the light.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Mom's description rang like a gong in my head -- if they'd been watching her, maybe they were watching me, too! I scanned the boulders that blocked the opening of the side canyon, but there wasn't any sign I'd been followed.

I flipped through the rest of the notebook, but Mom hadn't added anything more. My eyes went back to the clear storage bag that held two mounds of bubble wrap. For whatever reason, these two little packages had become the most dangerous artifact puzzle of all.

I reached into the bag and drew out the first bundle. It weighed almost nothing. I pulled apart the layers of wrapping to find a flat, round disc about two inches across that looked like granite, but was way too light to be

stone. Little symbols had been carved around the edge of one side like the numbers on a clock face, and a leather strap passed through a small hole that had been drilled near the top. A bigger second hole had been drilled to the right of the strap, set above one of the carvings at about the one o'clock position.

"What a cool pendant," I said, holding it by the strap. I shouldn't even have touched the strap with bare hands, but at least I wasn't risking leaving my fingerprints or oil on the pendant. Any self-respecting archaeologist would know that. I took a closer look at the symbols. Mom had shown me Anasazi markings before, but I'd never seen anything as finely detailed as the laser-straight lines etched into this artifact. The ancient Anasazi Indians would carve or paint images called *glyphs* onto rocks and pottery and stuff. Mom explained that some glyphs represented the people who made the drawings, or the animals they'd hunt. But they also used more abstract symbols. They might have meant something important or maybe they were just a design. We didn't know for sure what the glyphs really said because the Anasazi disappeared almost a thousand years ago. No one knows why. All that's left of them are their abandoned cliff dwellings, pottery, and glyphs.

Nice as the pendant was, it didn't seem to be worth kidnapping someone over it. I closed it back up in its bubble wrap and returned it to Mom's plastic storage bag. Maybe the second artifact would explain more. I pulled out the other bundle, which was slightly larger than the pendant's packaging and seemed to weigh a bit more. I dug through several layers of wrapping, and then my eyes fell on the most beautiful object I'd ever seen in my life.

What in the world was this? A perfectly round ball of polished metal, larger than a marble but smaller than a hen's egg, sat nestled in the middle of the bubble wrap. The orb had been formed from strips that were woven into a hollow sphere with regular openings in its surface, making it look like a miniature soccer ball. Its surface glinted in the light like a metallic hummingbird, flashing from black to a liquid mercurial gray, to silver, to brilliant white. And that was the biggest puzzle -- like Mom mentioned in

her notes, everyone knew that the Anasazi didn't do metalwork. So what was it doing with a 1,000 year-old Anasazi mummy?

I grasped the orb using the bubble wrap and brought it close to my eyes to see if it also had been etched with glyphs. Nothing; its outer surface was smooth. I tried to peer through the openings in the weave pattern to look into its center, but I had trouble focusing on any part of it. The air around it shimmered and warped, pulsing like it was alive with energy. The more I gazed into the artifact, the stronger the pulses became. I got this sudden impulse to touch it. Yea, right. I could be holding the most valuable artifact ever found in America -- I wasn't going to follow some stupid urge and wind up ruining its finish. The rippling light tickled the back of my eyes. *Touch it*, part of my mind said again.

I tried to clear my head, but the little ball kept flashing in a hypnotic dance. The harder I tried to focus on it, the faster the lights swirled. Ripples of energy spread out from the orb, tugging at me as they passed through my body. *Touch it!* something inside me commanded. My eyes watered as I stared at the orb, but it held me fast, like as if I had no will of my own. I couldn't even blink. *Touch, it touch it, touch it...* The desire to grasp this strange object hit me like a tidal wave. My resistance crumbled. I wanted -- no, I *needed* -- to grab hold of this thing. I brought my right hand over to pick it up out of the bubble wrap, but as much as I now wanted to hold it, some force held me back.

I *had* to touch the orb. Nothing else mattered. I held my breath and redoubled my efforts, straining against the invisible barrier. My hand crept toward the ball at a snail's pace. I put every ounce of my will into making contact. An instant later, whatever was keeping me away from the orb vanished like the popping of a balloon. My arm shot forward, I gripped my prize -- and opened my mouth in a silent scream of surprise as energy shot out from the artifact and up my arm.

Raw power filled my chest and flared out, tracing paths to every cell in my body like I was a human battery. Glowing pulses of light spun over its surface, slowly at first, then faster and faster, throwing out bolts of electric blue light. I couldn't take my eyes off the whirling energy even though it

made me dizzy. My eyes closed, but the image of the orb was etched into my eyelids. It grew bigger in my mind's eye, expanding until it was as big as a house. The tiny openings I'd noticed in the little orb grew to the size of doorways. One of them pulled me through to the inside. I tumbled, weightless, in the center of this massive sphere that now spun around me. Each doorway that whizzed by revealed scenes of strange buildings, cities, landscapes, stars, skies, and planets.

After what seemed like hours, the sphere slowed and began to shrink, slipping me out through a doorway that showed the side canyon as it drew back to its original size. Everything was still. The rush of power throughout my body faded away. I opened my eyes. Or maybe they were already open, I don't remember. I blinked furiously and found myself looking at my right hand, which was still cradling the orb. What had happened? Had *anything* happened? How long had I been sitting here? If I could believe my watch, almost no time had passed at all. Maybe a couple of minutes at most. Talk about a bizarre daydream.

I set the artifact on its packing tissue. As I let go, I felt a sharp tug in my chest. A wave of dizziness hit me like when I'd gone on too long a hike without eating anything. Then I noticed my fingers were inching back toward the thing. I didn't remember making my hands do that. I scrambled to my feet and backed up a few steps, stuffing my hands into my pockets to keep my fingers under control. After several shaky breaths, the intense longing for the orb settled into a dull ache. But I could still feel the need. That's what really freaked me out: something in me *needed* to hold it.

"Get a grip," I said, slapping myself to make sure I was awake. I had no time for daydreams or whatever this was. I knew this weird metal ball was the key to why Mom was taken. I had to get it to the sheriff, but I'd have to explain everything to Granddad first. And before that, I was supposed to meet Allie at Mooch's nest. The sooner I could meet up with her and get back home, the closer I'd be to helping rescue Mom.

I re-wrapped the artifacts in their bubble wrap, slipped them into the storage bag with Mom's notebook, and zipped the bag safely inside my backpack. Then I was on my way. Being on the move made me feel more

like myself already. *Just wait until Allie sees what I found*, I thought as I climbed out the side canyon and headed to Mooch's place. *Her pottery shards are nothing compared to this. One look at the orb and pendant will give that girl fits!*

* * *

I followed the narrow trail that led up to the top of the next canyon, breathing heavily from a combination of the midday heat and the excitement from my discovery. The strange episode I'd had with the orb replayed over and over in my head, distracting me from my hike. "Better pay attention to the path," I cautioned myself. Absentminded strolling along a four-inch wide goat trail was a quick way to get seriously hurt. Loose stones could tumble down from the cliff wall above and rocks that littered the path waited to trip the unwary. I stepped over a round stone in the trail that was about the size of the orb. *The orb*. As if it had been summoned, the image of the beautiful sphere instantly took hold in my mind. How it shimmered and pulsed, the metallic light gleaming, glittering, the rippling waves...

My vision blurred. I stumbled over a rough spot on the trail and sprawled toward the edge of the cliff. Grabbing onto a boulder, I watched a small rockslide caused by my spill tumble past me, launching stones into space. My heart pounded against my ribs as I watched the rocks skitter and bounce their way down to the canyon floor, two hundred feet below. After several deep breaths, I gingerly worked my way back up around the boulder and sat down on the path to rest.

What's my problem, I wondered. I'd never spaced out while climbing before. Come to think of it, I didn't usually daydream about floating in the middle of metal orbs, either. It was like my brain entered La-La Land the moment I spied that beautiful little metal ball. At least that close call cleared my head. Almost becoming a human pancake has a way of snapping your mind back into focus.

I followed the path until I spied the two car-sized boulders leaning

against each other that signaled the entrance to Mooch's hidden home. I left the trail and clambered up the slope to the boulders, squeezing past a bush that screened a bowl-shaped depression between the two massive rocks. Inside was quiet and dark. The huge nest's tangle of branches, fur, lizard and snake skins, bottle caps, and anything else the notorious collectors could find filled the entire floor.

As I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dimness, I could just make out Mooch's form -- a porky little figure with round eyes, trembling ears, and a long, furry tail -- sitting in front of the nest, waiting for me like he always did. I wasn't sure how he knew, but I guessed that those big ears could pick up the sound of my footsteps from a long way off. His family wasn't nearly as bold, going into a squeaking panic when I scooted inside. They scampered every which way into little hidey-holes in the surrounding rocks. I sat still, waiting for things to calm down. The sounds soon dwindled as the family re-settled itself. A dozen pairs of beady eyes peeked out at me from deep within their nest.

"Hi, Mooch, it's me," I whispered. "I beat Allie here, so we can spend a little time together. With all the craziness going on, I don't know when I'll be back, so I brought extras to tide you over." I unzipped my pack as quietly as I could and opened the bag of scraps I'd packed from home. I broke off a piece of cheese -- their favorite treat -- and held it out to him.

Mooch grabbed his prize in his front paws and settled on his haunches. He started a rapid chewing back and forth like a typewriter working its way across a sheet of paper.

"Geez, Mooch, you're a packrat, not a pig! There's enough for everyone. See?" I held up more cheese along with the sandwich bread. "Lots more to go around. Want to bring out the new pups?" I set most of the food into a pile in front of me, keeping one last good chunk of cheese in reserve. Other packrats slunk over to the food, just long enough to grab a goodie before dashing back to safety. I put the remaining piece of cheese in my hand and held it close to the ground near Mooch. Familiar with the routine, he hopped onto my palm and snatched the snack. I raised my hand up to eye level so we could have our face-to-face. "Hey, Buddy,

how're you doing? Everything okay with the little ones?"

Mooch focused on his golden slice of treasure, his jaws working as fast as possible to bite off bits of the delectable cheese and shove them into his cheek pouches. I moved him to my shoulder, where he perched with his bushy tail draped down the front of my shirt.

As he gorged himself, I filled him in about Mom's vanishing and my finding her stash of artifacts. Sometimes he would pause from his chewing during more interesting parts of my description, orienting his ears to my voice like he wanted to capture the deepest meaning behind each phrase.

"I'm positive Mom's disappearance has something to do with this weird pendant and orb," I explained. "I've got to get this stuff to the sheriff and see if I can help them figure out who took Mom."

He stopped feeding and sat still, with eyes and ears locked on me, as if my description fascinated him.

"But before that, I've got to meet Allie here and then show all this to Granddad. Which reminds me." I pulled back a corner of the shrub and peered outside. Nothing moved in the afternoon heat. I settled back inside the nest. "Allie's late. No sign of her yet."

He flicked one ear, then fed a strip of bread crust into his mouth like a saw cutting up a log.

I brought out a trinket after he demolished the last of the food. "Hey, I got you another treasure," I said, pulling out a large marble made from clear glass with bands of color running through its center. "This look good?" Packrats were well known for collecting items and dropping one object in order to pick up another, but Mooch and I had gone way beyond that -- we'd developed a full-on trading game.

He sniffed the marble, then groped it with his front paws. He hefted it with what seemed to be a look of satisfaction. I brought my hand back up to my shoulder for him to climb on, then lowered my hand to the floor with him clinging to his bauble.

Mooch headed into his nest where some *thunks* and *clatters* told me he was finding just the right place for his new marble. A couple of minutes later, he emerged from his nest with a slender fountain pen grasped in his

paws. He dropped it on the floor in front of me. Our trade was done.

I shook my head as I examined the pen. "You crack me up. I can't figure out how you get ahold of stuff like this. One of these days, I'm going to take a peek inside this nest and --"

Mooch's sudden change in behavior stopped me in mid-sentence. His ears started twitching, and his head swiveled to the nest entrance. A minute later and I heard it, too: the sound of someone climbing up the rock face, heading straight toward us.

"Eliot, you there?" whispered a familiar voice from the other side of the bush.

"Yea, give me a sec, Allie," I said quietly, putting the scraps bag into my backpack. "Gotta go, Mooch." I stood slowly, trying not to startle anyone, but my movement still made the packrats dash for cover. Only Mooch remained in the middle of the floor, watching me. "I'll be back as soon as I can, hopefully with good news about Mom. You take care of the family, okay? And remember, stay clear of the owls!"

* * *

"Hey there," Allie said with a smile as I emerged from Mooch's nest. She was arranging a picnic lunch on a somewhat flat area of rocks to the side of the nest. "Sorry I'm late. I put together some food for us, but I didn't know what you wanted," she said, noting at least four different sandwiches laid out, along with fruit and cookies. Her smile faded as she scanned my face. "I'm still in shock about your mom. You doing okay? Have you heard any good news?" she asked gently, as if raising the subject of Mom's disappearance might suddenly break me into a million pieces.

I nodded as I snagged a roast beef sandwich. "Yea, I've got news all right, but it's totally bizarre. I need to get back home soon," I explained, wolfing down half the sandwich, "I've got to show Granddad what I've found out -- I'm sure Mom's disappearance has to do with some weird artifacts she found."

Allie frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"I've got the evidence right here," I said, tapping my backpack. "It all started this morning, right after Granddad drove off to go visit the university. I got a package in the mail from Mom today." I quickly described Mom's sending Granddad the package, how I used her GPS device to find the stash of artifacts and her notebook, and what Mom wrote about finding the skeleton and the artifacts.

"Your Mom's vanished because of some nice burial pottery?" Allie asked, shaking her head. "That makes no sense."

"I'm not making this up!" I snapped. If she wanted proof, I had all she needed. I zipped open my pack and pulled out the plastic storage bag. "Look, here's the package Mom hid in the side canyon. And this is her notebook with her name on it, and these are the artifacts. And I never said they were burial pottery. They're..." I shrugged, unable to come up with any way to describe them. "...Amazing. As soon as you see them, you'll understand." I pulled out the smaller bubble wrap bundle and carefully began unwrapping it.

Allie watched me work through the bundle's layers. "You said these aren't burial pottery, but didn't your Mom find them with a skeleton that had been sacrificed or something? What exactly *are* they?"

I removed the last bubble wrap from the first artifact and handed the opened bundle with the pendant nestled in the center of the packaging to her. "This one's a pendant, maybe an amulet. Check out the cool glyphs."

"*WHAT?*" Allie stared wide-eyed at the pendant, her mouth gaping open like a goldfish. "*Wba* -- where did you find this?"

I knew the pendant was cool, but her reaction took me completely by surprise – like she knew about the pendent and was surprised to see it. "I just *told* you how we got it: Mom found the pendant on a skeleton they uncovered in the new dig site. It looks like the person who wore it was stabbed, but it doesn't seem to be a battle, sacrifice, or even robbery. No one can figure out what happened. So what's got you so worked up—you know something about it?"

She shook her head. "Me? Why would you say that? I don't know

anything. It's just not what I expected. Sorry if I overreacted." She gave a lame smile.

"*Right*," I drawled. I watched her as she went through the motions of looking it over. "You *sure* there isn't something you're not telling me?"

Her gaze shifted from the pendant up to me. "*Hmmm?*" She smiled again and shrugged, and then went back to scrutinizing the artifact.

I shook my head. "*Girls*." I returned to unwrapping the second bundle. "If you're going to spaz like when you see the pendant," I said as I worked my way through the layers of bubble wrap surrounding the orb, "you need to get a grip because the orb is ten times as cool."

"Orb?" she asked as she set the pendant in its bubble wrap next to me.

"I don't have a clue what it is. But just *look* at it. The metallic design is amazing. See how beautiful it is?" I slid the unwrapped orb over to Allie.

"NO! *Noooo!*" she screamed. With a single glance at the orb, she'd lurched up and backwards, pressing her back against the rocks behind her. She stared at the metal artifact in sheer terror, white as a ghost, her head shaking back and forth.

I stepped in front of her to block her view of the orb, which seemed to have locked her in place. I grabbed her arms, but she didn't respond. "Allie! Can you hear me? Are you okay?"

She was shaking like a leaf. At last she blinked and pulled away from me. "No... no... Dad... I need --"

"Allie, you're scaring me -- *what is it?*"

She shook her head frantically as she grabbed her backpack. "I've... got to go... see Dad." She scrambled across the rocks to the path and ran down the trail without another word.

I was flabbergasted. I sat back down next to the orb and pendant. What had made her react like that? She definitely knew something about the pendant, but her reaction to the orb was even more bizarre. Like she recognized it, and it had scared her. Big time.

Just then, another realization struck me. I grabbed my binoculars from my pack and scanned the trail below. Was she really heading *down* the trail? Sure enough, I spotted her rush toward the canyon floor. But that was

completely the wrong way to go. She needed to climb *up* the trail to get to her house, to town, to Granddad's place -- anywhere, for that matter. *Down* the trail took you into miles of unending canyons and wilderness.

"Allie! *ALLIEEEE!*" my voice boomed off the canyon walls. I watched her through the binoculars and saw her pause and look back up at me. "Go up! Go *up* the trail! You'll get lost!" I made an exaggerated movement of pointing up to the top of the cliff.

My instructions did no good. After a moment's stillness, I saw her take off once again, running at breakneck speed down the trail. I knew what I had to do. Getting back to Granddad and Sheriff Doyle would have to wait. In her freaked out state of mind, she could get into serious trouble out there, and nobody knew where she was headed except me. I *had* to go after her.

I tossed the storage bag back into my pack and zipped it up. The two artifacts lay on top of their bubble wrap on the ground. I couldn't leave them there but I had no time to wrap them -- every second counted. I grabbed the pendant and hung it around my neck.

How to deal with the orb? I'd been able to hold it in its bubble wrap without any having any more weird daydreams, so I scrunched up the wrapping around it and shoved it into my front pocket. I could re-wrap it and store it properly later. I cinched my pack tightly and then took off down the trail after Allie.