

## **Excerpt from Chapter 1 of Warning! Cave Exploration Forbidden**

**By Gail S. Kibby White**

With his cell phone pressed to his ear, Chief Akumo asked the caller, “Are the parents sure their children have gone exploring in the foothill caves?”

The treacherous caves in the Arizona foothills had been under surveillance for months by four government agencies. Information from anonymous and confidential sources described camouflaged secret rooms hidden deep inside.

The agencies suspected the caves in the foothills off Route 17 north of Scottsdale and Phoenix of being the first stop in a chain of distribution storage locations. Dealers transported illegal drugs, firearms and laundered cash across the border from Mexico through Nogales, Arizona to the Phoenix location. The dealers then distributed the contraband to other storage locations near major cities across the United States. The government also suspected human traffickers used the rooms to hold kidnapped women bound for forced prostitution, children for sale to pedophiles, and illegal aliens.

A task force headed by the DEA included agents from the DEA, ATF, and the FBI. The head of the DEA assigned Chief Daniel Akumo and his partner, Officer Calvin Mauer, to the investigation team as representatives of the Phoenix Police Department.

Serving with the task force for several years, Akumo and Mauer learned first-hand the human dangers, natural hazards, and predators that lurked in the caves.

As Chief Akumo listened to Jeff Sooner, Jr., the owner of the nearby Sooner Campground, his mind flashed back to that fateful day several years before when he received a similar call from Jeff asking for his help in the search for three teenage boys lost in the caves.

It took the Chief’s search party ten and a half days to locate the boys in the vast dark labyrinth of passages. By the time the search party found them, they were beyond help.

The three pale, cold bodies still holding hands with their heads together sat huddled on the floor of one of the many tunnels, their backs against the stone wall. Burned out cell phones and flashlights lie in their laps; open dust-covered backpacks sat nearby. Empty plastic water bottles and torn paper wrappers that once held candy bars and various snacks littered the floor. Their vacant open eyes stared down the passageway, as though they still expected someone to appear and save them. Cries for help that echoed through the tunnels days before had long since faded

away. Clothes on the three lifeless bodies riddled with holes and bite marks served as evidence that rodents had begun their sacrilegious desecration. The stench of decaying flesh permeated the air.

The gruesome sight of the boys and the odor of death when they found them left memories in Chief Akumo's mind that haunted him to this day.

Seated at his gray metal desk in the far left corner of the small sparsely furnished concrete block Phoenix, Arizona Police Department substation, Chief Akumo leaned forward. He tilted his head as he placed his elbow on the desk and rested his cheek on a fisted hand. Steam and the smell of freshly brewed morning coffee rose from the dark blue mug seated on a coaster in front of him. The cup bore the Phoenix Police Department seal in gold embossed lettering. An open laptop computer rested on the desk to his right; the department logo displayed in the center of the screen.

As he listened to Jeff Sooner, his black eyebrows bowed toward the center of his forehead as worry creases began to form. His dark eyes narrowed.

At last, in a deep, gravelly voice with a western drawl, Chief Akumo responded, "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. How old are they?"

When the Chief heard Jeff's response, he frowned and asked, "Were they alone or with an adult?"

Aware of the many dangers lurking in the caverns both natural and human, after Jeff responded, Akumo asked, "How long have they been missing?"

Chief Akumo, drew in a deep breath, then blew it out between clenched teeth producing a faint hissing sound. "They've been missing for three hours, they're only six and nine years old, and they're in there alone? Did I hear you right?" he loudly exclaimed.

He sat up straight, leaned back, and sucked in another deep breath. In a display of exasperation, the Chief smacked the palm of his hand flat on the desktop. The mug of hot coffee jumped, slopping some of its contents onto the coaster and desk blotter. The sound reverberated across the quiet room, startling his partner.

Officer Mauer sat at his desk across from the Chief's completing reports on his laptop. He stopped typing and glanced over at the Chief.

"Okay, Jeff. We'll grab our gear and head on over there right away. Bye."

Chief Akumo glanced up at the clock hanging over the front door. The hands showed 10:45.

The bright morning sun shining through the mini-blinds over the windows on either side of the front door left a striped pattern on the dark laminated wooden floor.

He sighed, his lips pressed together as he thought, *I won't be able to go to the ballpark this afternoon with Danny and Elan. I'm sure they'll understand.*

During the spring and fall months, Chief Akumo and his two sons played softball every Saturday afternoon in a family softball league with other fathers and sons in a small Community Center ballpark in northern Scottsdale.

The Chief reached to his right and closed the laptop. As he pushed his chair back, his eyes landed on the silver-framed picture sitting in the left corner of the desk. He sighed. *The parents must be out of their minds with worry;* he thought as his gaze lingered for a moment on the picture of his wife, two sons, and daughter.

He swiveled his chair around, stood, and shoved the cell phone deep into his pants pocket. A large tall man at six foot three, his frame almost filled the space between his desk and the wall behind him. He straightened his uniform tie and tie clip, turned and reached behind him to the rack on the wall. The Chief removed his regulation dark-blue baseball-style cap with the Phoenix Police Department logo across the front, placed it on his head with both hands, and yanked the brim downward. His dark-blue uniform fit him as though it had been tailor-made. He presented a professional and imposing figure.

Chief turned around to the rack again and removed the belt containing his gun, holster, and other equipment. He wrapped the belt around his waist, adjusted it, and fastened the buckle.

Born of Apache parents and raised on an Apache Indian reservation north of Phoenix, Chief Akumo finished high school Cum Laude in Phoenix. He went on to Arizona State University, majoring in law enforcement and graduated top of his class. After graduation, he applied to the Phoenix Police Department.

He entered the police academy and rose to the rank of Chief in charge of this remote substation located 45 miles northeast of Phoenix on State Route 17. While he was in the academy, because of his Apache heritage, everyone called him Chief. The title stuck after he joined the police force.

Married for twelve years, Chief Akumo, his wife Misu, and their three children lived on a small ranch between Phoenix and the substation.

Now 35 years old, his high cheekbones, sunken cheeks, broad nose, bronzed skin, and long charcoal black hair secured in back with an elastic band reflected his proud Apache heritage.

Chief Akumo looked across the room at Officer Mauer, “Hey Cal, would you go ‘round back and bring up a patrol car? We’re going for a ride to the Sooner Campground. I’ll join you in a minute. Here, catch.” He turned and tossed the keys to Cal.

The Sooner Campground was familiar territory. During seasonal camping in the spring and fall, they received calls from the owner at least two or three times a month. Lost children or adults in the caves, drug overdose, thefts, and fights, were the usual reasons the owner, Jeff Sooner, Jr., called them.

Officer Mauer rose from his chair, expanding his tall, lean, and muscular frame. He reached out and caught the keys midair. Mauer turned to the wooden rack on the wall behind his desk, grabbed his Officer’s cap, and put it on his head. He lifted the belt with his equipment from the rack and buckled up.