

Chapter 1 — Dig

3 July: Jordan, East of the Dead Sea

Dread shivered through Hank Cameron as he studied the low, jagged mouth of the desert cave. He smacked a gloved hand against the crumbling dirt arch to test its stability. A cascade of sand and pebbles buried his boots. Not good, he thought, tasting the bitter cloud of dust as it billowed past his face.

He knew he should wait for the others to arrive. Even his archaeology professor in Washington State had warned him when he described his search plan, "Cliff cavities are very dangerous." But youthful excitement drove Hank forward to prove he had found a vault stuffed with treasure and relics of historic value.

He leaned into the dark opening. "Yahoo!" he hollered. The cave roof did not collapse. Still, he remained cautious. Too often his need to impress people led him into trouble. However, his confidence in using high technology to find a valuable excavation site continued to justify disobeying the orders of Jordan's most renowned archaeologist. "For the sake of Allah, just translate the documents I hired you to read. Nothing more."

With both hands Hank tossed a heavy rock into the chamber. It crashed against something solid without triggering a rock fall, scaring an animal, or arousing bats to flash past him.

Hopefully, I won't kill myself. Hank switched on the power pack hanging from his belt. After straightening his reddish-brown hair, he verified that the miniature body camera clipped to his shirt was recording the TV documentary he needed to sell.

As he scanned the barren desert landscape sloping up to the forty-foot tall sandstone walls he stood between, he began speaking. "This is not your grandfather's archaeology expedition. We're not looking for a city or a religious site mentioned in the Bible, or an old church or even a Roman battlefield. No, we're doing what no one else has ever tried. We're looking for the buried wealth of merchant clans strung across the Middle East 2,000 years ago. These clans were some of the richest and most influential in the region. They accumulated their fortunes by guiding camel caravans between Turkey and Egypt, and from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf."

"So why are we here?" He faced up the ravine. "Based on my research, I've discovered a clan's village. Along one side of this ravine, you can see a series of side-by-side, rectangular impressions created by rocks barely sticking out of the earth. They are house foundations. Hank put his foot on a nearby rock. "But the houses are just a hint of what's here. Careful study of satellite ground penetrating radar scans, that I ordered of this gap, revealed a secret. There is a deep cavity in the cliff behind this building's foundation. I think it's an ancient vault.

"Throughout this region thousands of years ago, it was common for villages to have two-story structures. Families lived on the top floor. Animals were kept overnight on the lower level, allowing their heat to rise and warm the family during cool nights."

He turned to the cave opening. "Being about twelve feet tall, such a house would have easily hidden this entrance. The homeowner, who was probably the head of the clan, would have also used side fences to block anyone from seeing movement behind the

house.”

Hank shuddered knowing what he would soon confront. “Let’s find out what is inside.” He squat-walked his muscular six-foot frame through the low opening. As his body moved from hot sunlight into chilly darkness blindness disorientation him.

When he knelt to stop banging his head against the inner ceiling, claustrophobia assaulted him. Instantly he wanted to back out of the confining space closing in on him, burying him, suffocating him. His sphincter constricted. His mouth went dry. His mind screamed: Get out! Get out!

To counter the explosion of panic, he chanted assurances seeded by the hypnotist he visited regularly to control his debilitating claustrophobia. “I’m safe. I’m helping others. I’ll be okay.”

It took a minute until he could physically get beyond his fear. First, he slowed his rapid gasps. Then, with a trembling hand, he slipped a flashlight out of a hip holster and switched on the light. Upon opening his eyes he almost bolted; blackness strangled the narrow beam. Instead, he concentrated on what little the light exposed to prevent his fear response from surging out of control again.

“This is . . . this is my first entry into the cave. Several steps in front of me is a rock wall hiding whatever is deeper inside. It appears to be made of granite. It’s also darker than the local pink sandstone surrounding it. Meaning, it must have been quarried at another site and brought here. Although the surface facing me is unfinished and rough, the quality of workmanship is revealed along the joints between the rock slabs. They are all straight and cemented tight with what is probably very strong Roman cement. Amazing, after more than two thousand years, there are no cracked seams.”

Hank moved the light beam as he continued describing the scene. “The cave width and height are about eight feet, once a person reaches the wall. Notice that it rises to the ceiling and disappears behind a supporting brick arch. Over the centuries, some of the ceiling in front of the arch has fallen.

“Luckily, whoever used this cave also planted a mud brick floor that slopes down toward the outside entrance. So the debris tumbled or slid downhill, choking the entrance but leaving good access to the wall.

“These man-made features substantiate that we’ve found a storage vault. But are the caravan clan’s profits here? I’d like to rush forward and find a way through the wall, but first I need to check for anything that might confirm our discovery.”

Hank swept his flashlight beam across the floor. Next to the left wall, a glint of light in front of several fallen slabs of sandstone caught his attention. “I’ve spotted a bone, or possibly a piece of pottery.” He sidestepped to the wall trying to better see the object. “It’s pottery, possibly the remnants of a candleholder or container of some sort.”

With his gloved hand he attempted to dislodge the piece from the surrounding dirt. “Funny, it’s smooth and clean, almost as if it has been routinely polished.”

A sharp rasping, like coarse sandpaper rubbing together, froze Hank. Oh no. Before he could jump away a brown streak shot from between the slabs of rock. Fiery pain dug into his left hand as a snake clamped its fangs deep into his thumb. Hank tried to shake the withering reptile off, but a curved fang snagged in the edge of Hank's leather glove.

Repeated lightning bolts of fire shot into his hand. He dropped the flashlight and seized the snake just behind its diamond shaped head. As he fell backward through the cave opening, Hank ripped the menace from the glove and tossed it into the dark. Outside in the sunlight, he lay on his back, grasping his wrist to keep the searing pain from racing up to his heart.

Another loud hiss sent a chill through his body. He looked toward the cave opening. Between his spread-eagle knees a white-and-brown colored snake slowly raised itself off the ground. It glared at him, within striking distance of his crotch.