



Chapter One

His boots made a satisfying squelching sound in the mud as he crossed the jungle dig site.

Oliver Ward grinned. His mom would be horrified. She rarely stepped a designer-clad foot off the Denver sidewalk, if she could help it. His dad would have a manly, resigned look on his face, and Oliver's brother, Isaac, would just roll his eyes.

It didn't matter, though. Oliver couldn't be happier.

He was thirty-one years old and living his dream.

He scanned the dig site. Several of his team members from the University of Denver were with him, including his mentor, Ben McBride. The archeologist had taught Oliver everything he knew. One day, Ben would retire, and Oliver planned to take over from him. Professor Oliver Ward. It had a nice ring to it.

His gaze took in the irregularly-shaped cut stones embedded in the side of the muddy hill. They'd pushed the jungle back to give them access to the remnants of the stone works that had been previously lost to time. Unidentified ruins waiting for Oliver's team to discover their secrets and their place in history.

Archeology in Ecuador was improving, but even now, in the late seventies, it was still haphazard and disjointed from a lack of funding. He looked up at the thick jungle surrounding the site. Through the vegetation, he caught a glimpse of the river not too far down the hill.

It didn't help that the site was in the Amazon jungle, on the wild eastern side of Ecuador. His boots sank into the mud again. The wild terrain made everything harder.

There was a lot more archeology work going on in neighboring Peru—at the famous Inca ruins there. But Oliver knew there were fascinating Inca sites here, too, waiting to be discovered.

Just ahead, crouched down by the ruins of a rock wall, he saw Carlos Lopez, the local archeologist who'd brought in Oliver's team. The man was smart, and keen to improve the methods and understanding of both the pre-Incan and Incan cultures. He wanted to share the history of his country with the world.

"Oliver." A woman's voice made him turn.

"What have you got, Cheryl?" He crouched down beside the hole she was digging.

Dr. Cheryl Wilson was a good archeologist, although she didn't love fieldwork, and mostly enjoyed being inside the university lecture halls. She didn't hide her dislike of the mud, bugs, and the humidity. Still, he couldn't fault her dedication.

Cheryl lifted a shard of ceramic. He took it carefully, studying it. Perhaps a piece of cooking pot. Cheryl was watching him, her gaze on his face. He stifled a sigh. She'd kept dropping hints about them having dinner or catching a show. She was a smart, attractive woman. She'd started the day with her blonde hair styled into feathered locks that swept away from her face. He'd seen the style become popular with the students at the university as well. But here, the heat and humidity of the jungle had left her curls somewhat bedraggled.

Back in Denver, Cheryl was the kind of woman he usually dated. But now, he felt...nothing but mild appreciation. To be fair, lately he'd been feeling disillusioned with dating. He gave in to the urge and heaved an internal sigh. No matter how attractive the women, he'd felt a lack of passion, excitement, and challenge.

Growing up, Oliver's father had wanted Oliver to follow in his footsteps and become a lawyer. Law had made Oliver feel the same way as his recent dates—bored and stifled.

History on the other hand... Excitement flooded his veins. The thrill of discovery, of uncovering parts of the past and fitting them together, making sense of where they'd come from, that's what lit Oliver on fire.

"Oliver?"

He blinked and saw Cheryl beaming at him. She probably thought his look was for her.

Shit. "Let's see." He lifted the pottery to eye level. "Doesn't look decorative. It's everyday stuff. This has to be a village." He scanned the structures. He was sure they had once been houses.

"You still think it's Inca?" she asked.

He nodded. "Probably." But what were they doing here in the dense jungle?

With a nod at Cheryl, he carried the ceramic shard over to the tent they'd set up to store their finds. Plastic tubs were filled with ceramic and carved stones. They had also found a couple of pieces of delicate gold jewelry.

Ben was working nearby. The older man raised a hand before bending back to his work. Pausing, Oliver set his hands on the hips of his mud-splattered cargo pants and studied the rest of the dig site. A couple of people were working higher up on the slope. He carefully traversed the slippery stones pressed into the mud and headed in their direction. He wondered why the people who'd built this place had placed these stones here, had built their homes here. What was so special about this spot?

"Hey, Oliver," Dr. Sam Fields, a close friend of Oliver's, called out. They'd studied together at college and been on several digs together.

"How's it going?" Oliver asked.

Sam winked. "Slow and dirty."

“I like it slow and dirty, dude,” Cory Kowalski, another member of the team, said. The young man was a graduate student and they happily gave him all the dirty jobs.

Oliver smiled, then glanced upward. The sky was filled with heavy, gray clouds. They’d get a downpour soon.

Suddenly, he heard a scream, followed by several shouts.

He spun and saw Cory sliding down the slope. The young man’s arms were flailing, but as his boots slipped off the stone, they hit dirt and he slid faster.

Shit. Oliver leaped forward, his gaze shifting down to the long sweep of the Rio Napo. If Cory didn’t stop, he’d end up going over the edge and into the caiman-infested water. No one wanted to find themselves face to face with the aggressive alligator-like predators.

Oliver reacted without thinking. He crouched, snatching up a coil of rope off a pile of gear near the edge of the dig. He ran across the slippery stones, praying he didn’t slip, and then threw one end of the rope.

It snaked around a nearby tree. “Tie it off,” he yelled.

Then he hurried down the slope after Cory. His boots skidded and more mud splattered up his khaki trousers.

Right near the steep edge of the river, Cory had managed to grab on to some tree roots, and was holding tight, his face lined with fear. Mud streaked his cheek.

Oliver pulled tight on the rope, coming to a stop just above the man. “Hang on, Cory.”

The young man looked up and swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“I’ve got you.” Oliver grabbed the man’s arm and pulled him up.

Down by the river, Oliver heard a splash. He turned his head and saw that an interested caiman had slid off the bank.

No snack today, buddy.

Oliver quickly and expertly tied the rope around Cory. The young man's chest was heaving. Looking back up the slope, Oliver waved at the others.

"We're going to take it nice and easy, and take our time walking back, okay?"

Cory nodded. Using the rope, they carefully navigated their way up the muddy slope. It was slow going, but finally they reached the others.

The young man collapsed on the ground. "You are one cool cat, Dr. Ward." He scraped a shaky hand over his face.

"You're welcome." Oliver slapped Cory on the back.

As Cheryl whisked Cory off, Oliver leaned over and pressed his hands to his thighs. His heart was still pumping hard and he took a second to catch his breath.

When he lifted his head, movement at the far edge of the dig, near the tree line, caught his eye. He spotted a small figure standing in the dense vegetation, sticking to the shadows.

Was it a local? He frowned. At that moment, the first few spots of rain splattered down, hitting his shoulders and arms.

From what he could make out, the person was small and slim, and wearing cargo pants and a khaki shirt. They had a hat pulled low over their face, but Oliver was sure the person was staring at him.

For some reason, his heart kicked against his ribs, then he watched as the figure turned and moved along the tree line with a quick, economic gait.

Then the heavens opened up and rain saturated Oliver's clothes.

Within seconds, he could barely see the trees, let alone the lone figure. He kept frowning. From the way the person moved, he was sure it was a woman.

Who was she? Why was she watching his dig?

Ben called out his name then, and with one final glance at the shadows, he turned to join the others.

Persephone Blake strode down the street in the provincial capital of Tena, Ecuador. Perched on the confluence of two rivers, the town was a regional hub, and the number of tourists visiting was growing—lured by intrepid adventures into the Amazon. They had several cheap hotels and hostels, including the best one, where the American archeologists were currently staying.

She nodded at a group of smiling kids playing with some dogs in the street. They grinned back at her, teeth white against their bronze skin and dark hair.

Reaching the doorway to a bar and restaurant, she yanked open the door and walked inside. It was a dive, but had a certain charm to it.

God, how many days had she spent like this in her twenty-six years? Walking into seedy bars or pubs? She'd lost count.

Persephone headed straight for the bar and ordered a tequila in Spanish.

Her Spanish was pretty good, her French passable, and her Portuguese a bit spotty. It was thanks to her good ol' dad that she could speak a smattering of half-a-dozen languages. He'd certainly dragged her around enough countries during her childhood.

The bartender nudged her drink toward her in a chipped glass of dubious cleanliness. She set the coins down on the scarred, wooden bar and took a mouthful of her drink. It was watered down, but it would do.

She'd spent most of her formative years in South and Central America, while her dad had worked mining, or oil and gas jobs. Her mother had popped into their lives whenever the hell it had suited her. Athena Blake only did things that suited her.

Persephone shoved all thoughts of her mother away and took another sip of her bad drink. She turned slightly, so she could see the group sitting at the back of the bar.

The archeologists had all showered and changed. She heard a higher-pitched laugh and zeroed in on the lone woman in the group. She was perched on the edge of her chair, wearing pants that were outrageously wide at the bottom, and had her blonde hair styled in huge feathered waves.

Persephone snorted. In less than an hour, the humidity in this country would make it a waste of time to do all that work on her hair. Persephone kept her own brown hair clipped short in a pixie cut. It was less hassle that way and required no styling. The group looked to be in good spirits, and Persephone saw the woman desperately trying to capture the eye of the man sitting beside her.

Couldn't blame the woman. The man was outrageously good-looking. Put him in a tuxedo and he'd make an excellent James Bond. He had thick, dark hair and an easy, sexy smile.

Even from a distance, Persephone felt a curl of heat lick her belly.

She squelched it. She had no time for men. They always disappointed her, no matter how pretty they looked. Besides, he'd spotted her today at the dig site. She must be losing her touch.

Setting her glass down, she reached inside her shirt and pulled out the papers she kept in a clear, waterproof sleeve.

The first thing she saw was a picture of a tropical island. White-sand beaches surrounded by azure waters. Her retirement goal.

The next thing she pulled out was a photocopy of a page out of a handwritten diary. The writing was loopy and hard to read.

This was key to her achieving her retirement plan.

Her plan was to be retired at thirty-five. Persephone wanted to be sunning herself on the beach and banging sexy surfers or fishermen. She stroked the copy of the diary page. It held clues from a 1920's expedition to find a fabulous treasure right here in Ecuador.

That group had been consumed by the jungle, but Persephone wasn't going to let that happen to her. She was made of tougher stuff.

She folded the island picture and another tattered picture fell out of the sleeve.

This one was of a lovely Victorian house, somewhere in the USA. She'd never seen the house in real life before. While she'd been born in the States, she hadn't spent a lot of time there. But she'd seen this picture in a magazine once, and something about it had captured her interest. It looked like the kind of house a tight-knit family lived in. A family who celebrated Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Fourth of July. She snorted. Persephone had never had a home, so she didn't know much about them.

She shook her head. It was silly that she'd kept the picture. She should throw it out. She was destined for a beach shack by white sand and blue waters.

She lifted the diary page. Right now, she needed to stay focused on following the clues, and solving her big problem—the fact that the archeology team were digging on the location of her first clue.

Oh, and she couldn't forget her other problem. The fact that Sosa, the asshole dealer who'd sold her the page, had also sold a copy to someone else. Which meant Persephone would likely have company of the not-so-friendly kind before too long.

When the treasure was an invaluable lost emerald of the Inca, it guaranteed problems.

Someone sat on the stool beside her, reeking of cheap whiskey.

“*Hola, bella,*” the man drawled.

She rolled her eyes and gave the man an Arctic glare.

Clearly, he was too drunk to read her signals. He set a beefy hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged him off. “Shove off,” she said, in Spanish.

His face hardened. “Just want to have some fun.”

“Not interested.”

His thick brows pulled together. “You aren’t being very friendly.”

Great. She could deal with this buffoon, but it would attract unwanted attention.

“The lady said she wasn’t interested.”

The smooth voice spoke in perfect, accentless Spanish. She felt warmth along her spine as a firm body pressed close to her back. Every single one of her nerves flared to life.

“Piss off, *gringo,*” the drunk muttered.

Persephone was done. She moved her foot, catching the leg of the stool. It tipped over, and the man sprawled on the floor with a string of curses.

The bartender leaned over the bar, barking out some rapid words to the man. The drunk glared at the bartender, then at Persephone, before he hauled himself to his feet. He unsteadily weaved his way to the door, ranting to nobody.

Persephone grabbed her drink and downed the last of her shot before she turned.

Mr. Mouthwatering Archeologist was even more handsome up close.

She discovered that he had beautiful, cobalt-blue eyes, and he smelled good. *Damn.*

“Nice move,” he said with a smile.

“I didn’t need a rescue.” She slammed her glass back on the bar.

“I can see that.” He tilted his head to the side. “Can I get you another drink?”

“Hell, no.”

His sexy smile just widened. “Not the usual response I get when I offer to buy a woman a drink.”

She snorted. “I bet.” Persephone was sure that women fell over themselves whenever this man gave them any attention. Pretty, normal women, who wanted to play house with him, cook his meals, roll around naked in his bed, and give him pretty, well-behaved kids.

“I have to leave,” she said.

“I wish you’d stay.” His blue eyes bored into hers, like she was an interesting story that he couldn’t wait to hear.

Staring at that gorgeous face muddled her brain. He was too handsome, too everything. Dammit, she never let anything or anyone fog up her head.

“Why?” She mentally cursed herself for opening her mouth.

He leaned closer. “Because I’d like to know why you were spying on my dig today.”

Shit. She stiffened. God save her from smart men.

Persephone spun and strode toward the door. The man grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

Quick as lightning, she let her switchblade fall down her sleeve and into her palm. She flicked it open and out of view of everyone in the bar, she pressed it against his collarbone.

“I don’t like being grabbed.”

He lifted his hands, palms up. “Fair enough.” His voice lowered. “But I will admit I liked touching you.”

Persephone wasn't dumb. She felt the electric current arcing between them. *Dammit*. He was a complication she didn't need.

"Forget you saw me," she said.

"Never going to happen." Again, she got that sexy smile.

Because she felt her brain fogging up again, she pressed her blade a little harder against his skin. He jerked back, and a thin line of blood welled.

Persephone used the distraction to spin under his arm and escape out of the bar.