

CHAPTER ONE

2016

MYSTERIOUS GEOLOGICAL FIND IN JOSHUA TREE

Recent earthquake activity in Joshua Tree has exposed an unusual geological find. It was first discovered by cavers attracted to a number of new cave openings that have appeared along the Little San Bernadino Mountains. Early reports indicated “a large diamond” has been found. The discovery has excited much discussion amongst the local community, and the Joshua Tree Park Authority has invited experts from the Institute to investigate the matter. An expedition led by our leading geologist, John Hannebury, was sent out to the site yesterday...

- from ‘The Coil’ student newspaper, the Tesla Institute, San Bernadino, California.

John Hannebury was a lover of minerals and rocks and rock formations. He enjoyed their diverse colors and properties: the delicate pink of dolomite, the glassy blackness of obsidian. He admired their many fine textures: the coarse graininess of granite, the mottled smoothness of marble. He reveled in the language and poetry of their nomenclature: of bauxite, augite, igneous, andesite, feldspar, of emerald, gemstone and diamond. They were words that rolled off his tongue like mystical spells, incantations of ancient memory. His handsome, weathered face had earned its lines and imperfections through a life spent outdoors in the pursuit of his passion that was, incidentally, his profession. His square jaw may have been carved in sandstone, his blue eyes may have been set in turquoise, his cracked mouth a fault-line.

“You know, I always thought of that thing as proof of the existence of God.”

He was still hanging suspended in mid-air from an abseiling line when he said this to his assistant, Kathy Rodriguez, who was standing at the bottom of the shaft into which Hannebury was descending. The shaft was wide for most of the descent, except for two points where it narrowed to about three feet. After almost two hundred feet it opened out into a spheroid chamber, about fifty feet in diameter, with a debris-covered floor and a long, narrow fissure across the chamber, almost directly under the opening.

For the last ten or so feet of the descent John recklessly played out the line and dropped rapidly to the floor, missing it by inches before he stopped.

“How do you mean?” said Kathy, ignoring John’s macho display as she helped him detach from the line. Like John, she was clad in climbing boots, shorts, sweater, backpack and helmet affixed with a halogen lamp. The sensible ponytail of dark hair belonged to her alone though.

“Well, think about it. If the meteor hadn’t impacted at Chicxulub, the dinosaurs would never have become extinct and we humans wouldn’t have evolved. It’s almost as though God said, ‘Hey you dinosaurs have had a good enough run, it’s time to give those funny little mammals a shot at becoming intelligent’”.

“So you’re saying the meteor was directed by God to crash there?” said Kathy, amused. She made her way into the chamber, followed by Hannebury.

“Pretty obvious if you ask me. In fact, it’s so obvious it seems to refute the possibility of God. *His* ways are supposed to be mysterious, aren’t they? This thing, the whole K-T boundary event, looks like a dead give-away - God lending a hand.”

“Ha ha, very Douglas Adams.”

Kathy had been working for Hannebury for two years now and enjoyed his unusual take on things. She had been a student at the Institute under him before that and had impressed him so much that he had offered her a job as soon as she gained her degree. Besides geology, she also had expertise in the burgeoning field of crystallography, an area she was especially passionate about. The passion had eventually extended to John himself, and despite the obvious folly of such a move, she had found herself falling in love with him – a married man and her professional senior. To compound matters, he had fallen for her as well, telling her his marriage was already over. For a few months they were the scandal of the department, if not the entire Institute.

“So did you come up with this brilliant theory when you were there, at Chicxulub?” She turned around to look at the large object in front of them, the reason they had made the expedition. She began to place some battery-operated lamps around the site. They were small but powerful LEDs mounted on tripods.

“No, not really,” said John. “It’s just one of those whimsical notions I had a long time ago, I don’t know when. This place does remind me of the sinkholes there though.”

As Kathy turned on the lamps she asked, “So what theory do you have for this?”

“This,” said John, tentatively touching one side of the object now standing in the lamplight, “uh, this complicates things.”

The Object (for it seemed to require capitalization) looked like a large, rough-hewn oval of white quartz standing up out of the ground like some fancy Neolithic mirror frame. It might have passed for a natural geological anomaly were it not for the perfect hollow inner oval and one side that was flattened and strangely smooth.

Hannebury took a closer look at the Object and then glanced around at the chamber. He felt like he was inside a giant cracked egg. The crystalline structure before him, and the hollowed out and spheroid shape of the chamber, reminded him of one thing. “My first thought is this is some kind of giant geode. Right?”

“Right,” Kathy agreed. “But just so we’re clear – you’re not calling this another sign from God?”

John laughed. “No, no sign from God. Just a very unusual and giant geode.”

“But it’s missing most of its crystal deposits, except this one.” Kathy moved toward the Object and touched it, casting a professional eye over the facets, noting the crystal form, which appeared four-sided. “Only problem is, this is not quartz, or calcite, like you’d normally find inside a geode. If it wasn’t so damned big I’d call it a diamond.” She drew in her breath, impressed by the beauty of the thing. “Could it be a carbonado?”

She took out a small GoPro camera from her pack and began filming the area.

“A star diamond? I doubt it. Not something this big. My guess is, if it is a diamond, it’s from the mantle below.”

“Good call,” said Kathy inspecting an exposed section of the chamber wall. “Considering how far down we are, we’re well into the mountain’s bedrock. It’s all metamorphic-igneous from the Precambrian age down here.”

“But this mountain range is relatively young – it’s only been up since the Pleistocene.”

“True,” said Kathy, wondering now if John was simply testing her knowledge. She smiled at his comment: only a geologist would consider a mountain range ‘young’ at roughly two million years of age. But it was true: geologic time was vast, and she – like John – was used to thinking in such extended time scales.

“But what made this?” Kathy walked through the object’s narrow interior ring that was tall and wide enough to easily fit a person much larger than she. She studied its smooth inner edge and looked at where it disappeared into the ground. She took out a field loupe from her pack and placed it on the surface of the ring. Peering through the lens she saw that the Object’s crystalline structure was highly unusual. There were an extraordinary number of inclusions. She had never seen anything like it.

“It’s facetating!” she said, unable to resist the bad crystallographer’s pun. “It’s definitely been cut by somebody or some thing. Is it possible the Serranos made their way down here at some point?”

“I doubt it - I know, I’m full of doubts today.” He smiled at her. “Even if they did, it doesn’t seem likely that they had the tools or the knowledge to cut a perfect oval from a large crystal like this. But then again, the ancients did achieve some amazing things. The Egyptian pyramids.”

“Stonehenge,” added Kathy.

“Yeah.” He looked at the strange smoothness of parts of the floor around it. “This chamber doesn’t seem to have a cryptocrystalline shell, like you’d expect of a geode.”

“No, it looks like it was carved out of the sheer rock,” said Kathy. “I thought maybe a leftover from a massive concretion. But these rocks look strange – almost symmetrical.”

She trained her camera onto the floor, and among the debris noticed some of the smooth plate-like rocks. They were curved and shaped like unusual jigsaw puzzle pieces. There were also regular markings on their surfaces. Her eyes widening, she realized they weren’t rocks.

She picked one up, feeling the weight and texture of it. “Look, this feels synthetic! And these striations don’t appear to be natural. They look like carvings.”

“Where, let me see.” Hannebury joined her. “You’re right. It’s some sort of tile.” He looked at the carvings on the tile. They seemed to be part of an intricate lattice pattern that was possibly ornamental.

He looked around and noticed many more of them, scattered around the chamber, some broken in pieces by the violence of the earthquake, but most still intact. Directing his torch he could now see there were others clinging to the walls and even on the ceiling. The chamber had at one time been covered in them. He regarded it with new eyes. This definitely put a new spin on what they had found. “Looks like we’d better get Archaeology in on this too.”

“I agree,” said Kathy, carefully cleaning away more of the tile carvings. “Who do you think: Professor Manfredi?”

“Yeah. Gus is the man for this job.” He looked around at the chamber, or room, whatever it was. “This place will be more fun for him than a new tomb in the Valley of the Kings.”

He walked back over to the Object, pondering its significance. “The tiles are clearly man-made, but I wonder about this object. Did whoever came down here manage to shape it somehow, and why? Was it some object of worship? Was it purely ornamental, or could it be-”

“You know what it reminds me of?” Kathy cut in. She was standing back from the Object, taking it all in.

“What’s that?” asked John.

“Something from *Star Trek*.”

“Trek? Really? Which one?”

“Uh, *The Original Series*. It reminds me of something that was on one of the episodes. It was a time machine, as I recall.”

“Time machine?” said John, surprised. “Is that what you think this is?” He looked at the Object again, trying to imagine it *being* a time machine. “I thought my idea about God and the asteroid was a bit out there, but that’s-”

“-Crazy, I know,” she finished for him. “I’m just saying. But it would be interesting if it was. Haven’t you ever thought about what you’d do if you could go back in time?”

John considered the question for a moment. His first thought was that he would swap his wife for Kathy. But then that didn’t make sense, and he realized he was wishing he could *relive* his life, rather than go back in time as he was now. He looked at Kathy, waiting for his response, and smiled a secret smile. With her dark hair and brown skin and delicate Latina features she looked especially beautiful in the lamplight. “I suppose so,” he said, coming closer to her.

“Where would you go?” she asked, coming closer to him.

“Oh, I’d have to say the time of Jesus. It’s a bit obvious, but I’d really like to see how the Gospels hold up to the reality. And I’d like to meet Jesus. Wouldn’t you?”

“I guess so. I didn’t know you were that religious, despite all your talk about God.”

“Well, I’m not, but I am fascinated by the Man and his teachings. I like to think I’m spiritual.” He came another step closer to her.

“Yeah, I can see that,” said Kathy, taking another step of her own. She flashed on a memory of John from the night before. A memory of his ripped abs and his arms enfolding her. Her thoughts were becoming less than spiritual. They were almost within touching distance now. “There is something kind of soulful about you.” She put the camera down on the cave floor.

“Mmm, thanks. But it’s not the same thing.” He took another step and put his hands on her hips.

“What do you mean?” she murmured. She put her arms around him. They were really beginning to forget their work.

“The spirit is high, the soul is deep,” he almost whispered. “Mountain and valley. Which one are you?”

She shook her head, unsure. For a moment she looked sad. “I’m a work in progress.”

They kissed.

“*Krgggghhh, Krggggh.*”

The kiss was interrupted by a sudden crackle that came from John’s two-way radio that was wirelessly connected to the large loop antenna on the surface. It was the thin voice of site engineer Cal Bradbury calling from above.

“*Hey John, Kathy, what’s going on down there? Could you please report?*”

John looked exasperated for a moment then grabbed the radio by his side and spoke into it. “Nothing to report just yet, Cal. We’re still setting up. But it’s...”

They both began to feel vibrations coming from the ground and the sound of rumblings deep within the earth. “What the-?” said John.

“What’s that John. What’s happening?”

The vibrations grew stronger. The ground began to shake.

“Shit, this is not the place to be caught in an aftershock!” said John.

“I think we’d better find somewhere safe!” yelled Kathy.

“I think you’re right.” John held the radio to his ear.

“What’s going on down there, John?” said Bradbury, beginning to sound worried.

“We’re gonna have to hunker down, Cal. It’s a quake!”

“What?!” Bradbury sounded stunned.

Rocks and sediment from the walls began to crumble and fall as John and Kathy ran desperately for protection. The chamber floor was shaking violently.

“Quick, get inside the object, it’s the only shelter!” yelled John as he guided Kathy underneath the Object’s protective oval frame.

As they did so, the white crystal material of the Object began flickering and glowing, and both could hear a humming sound coming from it.

“What the hell is it doing?” said John.

“I don’t know. It seems to be activating!” said Kathy, incredulous. She looked up at the Object’s frame and saw that it was glowing a bright white now, lighting up the dig site; and the humming was painfully loud.

The ground bucked from the Object’s activation. Kathy could feel its power beneath her. It seemed to be shaking loose from its moorings. Kathy feared it would drop back into the earth and be lost forever – and them with it.

“I don’t think it’s safe here!”

Kathy felt a dread of being swallowed by the earth, and panicked. Even though the debris of the chamber was still falling around them, she made the choice to move away from the relative shelter of the Object. It was getting bad in the chamber no matter where they were. The walls and the floor were crumbling and she saw that the fissure was widening.

“No, don’t!” yelled John. He looked up uncertainly at the activating Object, but remained within it.

Kathy stared imploringly into his eyes, and John’s despairing and distraught face was the last thing she saw before a large rock glanced off her helmet and knocked her unconscious.