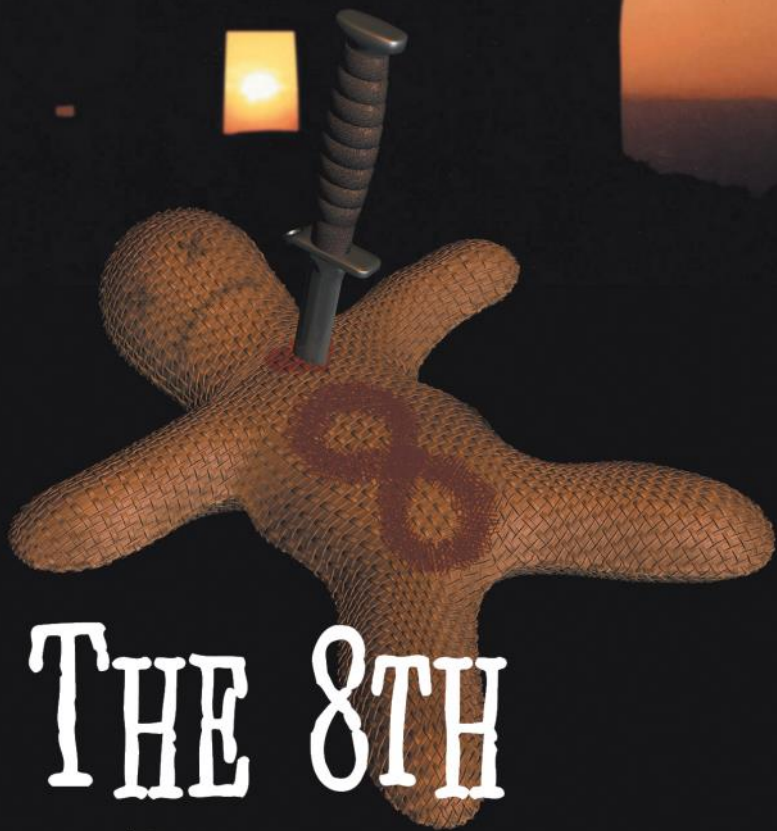


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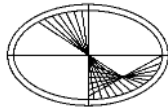
THE 8TH
DOLL

PROPHECY OF THE MAYAN CALENDAR

THE 8TH DOLL



CHRIS RAKUNAS



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THE 8TH DOLL

Chris Rakunas

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Dedication

To Darcey, my everything. Always yours forever.

Also by Chris Rakunas:

Tears for the Mountain:

Delivering Hope after the Earthquake in Haiti

Acknowledgments

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There is no way that I could ever say thank you enough to my wife, Darcey, for all of her support. Thank you for not committing me when we were walking through the ruins of Dzibilchaltun and I started to get 'that look.' I would be remiss in not thanking Melanie Wilderman and Ted Satterfield, both of whom were in Dzibilchaltun with us and humored me while I made friends with a taxi driver and asked him to tour us around the Yucatan.

This book would not have the same flavor if I did not acknowledge the namesake for the main character, Mike "Skips" Kane. You have been a close friend for the last 15 years, and I am glad that I could name my favorite character after you. Oh yeah, sorry I had your character stabbed, too. I would also like to thank Kathy Kane for allowing me to use her name in the book as well.

The amount of support I still get from everyone at 2727 Channing Way continues to uplift me. Finally, thank you to you, the reader, for picking up this book and enjoying it. Without you, all of us would be storytellers talking to ourselves.

Author's Note: While the following is a work of fiction, the locations, cultural references, and geological information discussed is accurate. All the information regarding the ancient Mayan ruins of Dzibilchaltun, including the information about the cenote and the famed Temple of the Seven Dolls is true as well.

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TUESDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2012

Charlie Landry was running at full speed down the broken limestone path, the tufts of dust kicking up behind him like a roadrunner cartoon. His lungs had long since given up trying to breathe normally and now were diminished to the point of feeling like burning coals placed in his chest cavity. As he came to the intersection of the three sacred roads, or Sacbes as they were called in the Mayan dialect, he opted not to run down the fourth path which would lead him back to the visitor's center.

Instead, he continued down past the 16th century Spanish church, or what was left of it, because he remembered there were trees near the sink hole, and he thought he could find some cover there. Cover from whatever was chasing him.

Oh, he *knew* what it was, but he couldn't believe it had just appeared out of nowhere on the day he had just discovered...

There were the trees. He saw them, and darted into their protective cover. It was not until he was safely inside the nestle of trees that he allowed himself to drop his hands down onto his knees and begin sucking in for air. He had sprinted farther than he could remember doing so in decades, all of it out of fear, out of panic. He thought now about the road back to the visitor's center and wondered if he shouldn't have taken it when he had the chance.

Although maybe he was imagining things. He listened, and the ruins of Dzibilchaltun were completely silent in the Yucatan evening. There were no birds, there were no people, the tourists

had left hours ago, and the museum staff had been departing right when he showed up. He was alone in the shadows of 1500 year old ruins, a place that had helped predict the end of the world.

When this thought crossed his mind, it made him think two things. First was that, despite all the hype, the Mayans were right. The world was about to end for humans, the same way things had ended for the dinosaurs and many other species. The cyclical nature of life was suddenly visible to him; he realized we were on the verge of the end, maybe only a few days away. The second thought was that his life might end before he had the chance to tell anyone what was about to happen. Not only did he know the date and time that the world was going to end, but he had the key to stopping it. It was so simple to stop and save everyone's lives with just the flick of a switch, but someone needed to know which switches to flick. He had to tell someone.

Charlie's heart was still pounding inside his chest, but he knew he had to move on, that whatever was after him would be there soon. He decided that he would have to loop back from the giant sink hole, go on the other side of the temples that lined Sacbe two, and make his way back to the visitor's center. There would be no people there, but his jeep was there. If he could get into it, he just had a chance.

He took two steps from the cover of the trees and stopped to look around. It was still silent. No noises from the mangrove jungles, no noises from the birds in the trees, just sheer silence. That was part of the reason it was so surprising to him that he did not hear the fling of the atlatl or the sound of the arrow it had flung until it was right upon him. There was the telltale whistle for half a second, and then a piercing pain shot through his back the likes of which he had never felt before. It was so awful; it made the searing lungs feel like a pinch.

He tried to reach behind him, but as soon as he moved his arm a shooting pain in his chest disabled him from moving any farther. Slowly, he bent his head down and rolled his eyes to the ground. Protruding from his right chest wall was a spear at least three feet in length. Since people fall back into their truest selves in time of crisis, Dr. Landry did not panic at that time. In the blink of an eye he assessed the situation, and realized he had a pierced lung that was filling up with his own sanguine end. Since there were no hospitals or doctors near him, these were to be his last moments.

He was about to die.

Suddenly fearless of death, Charlie looked into his left hand and remembered what he held. It was cloth, and he could deliver a message on it, although it had to be short. Simply moving his hand up to hold the object at waist level sent brutalizing pains through his person, but he knew this was his only chance to deliver his message.

It was mankind's only chance for survival.

He coughed briefly, spitting up a thick, almost black liquid that had come from deep inside him and oozed out from his mouth, already turning ashen with blood loss. It gave him an idea, and he dipped the two fingers of his right hand into the mess of life that was now pouring from his chest wound. He would be his own ink.

Footsteps coming through the foliage prompted him to panic. He had to deliver the message in a way that his killer would be unable to retrieve it, change it, or even see it. He looked up, and all he saw was the blue water in the sink hole.

With the last gasps of energy pouring from his soul, Dr. Charlie Landry managed to run just a few paces and then fling himself into the sinkhole's waters. His body would not have registered a high score for its dive, having just barely been able to complete a belly flop. As the momentum carried him towards

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the middle of the watering hole he opened his left hand and watched the doll sink down through the blue waters, the rays of light reflecting off fishes and shiny rocks. He knew someone would find this doll and understand it.

As the blackness crept in on him, he barely felt the scratching on his left leg as someone hooked him and dragged him back to the shore. The doll was almost deep enough to be out of his sight when a hand grabbed his shoulder, lifted him from the water and dropped him on the rocky ground, splintering the atlatl arrow.

He was bringing in his final breath when the face blotted out all light. It was a skull with a golden crown, feathers protruding in a halo around it, and war paint everywhere. Charlie knew the face, but had always believed it was just a legend. This was no legend. It was here. He was already exhaling when the skull-faced deity pulled an obsidian knife and beheaded him.

L L L

WEDNESDAY, 19 SEPTEMBER 2012

CHAPTER 1

S kips stood on the shore of the sink hole – which he knew the locals called a cenote – and surveyed the scene. It had been awhile since he had seen blood like this, and it made his skin crawl, although he didn't show it to anyone. Things had been good since his time in Eastern Europe, with nothing out of the ordinary coming through his life. Just the way he liked it.

His steely blue eyes squinted in the morning sun, and the gentle breeze barely ruffled the closely cropped blonde hairs on his head. Shifting his weight from one well-worn construction boot to the other, he placed his hands back into the pockets of his jeans and thought for a moment. *Who do you call when you find a beheaded member of your team on the site of ancient Mayan ruins?*

Just an hour before, he had received a telephone call from the corporate office back in the States, and they gave him a few details. Mostly that he had a short time frame to resolve everything, that his other work had to still be completed, and that the media – whatever of it there was on this corner of the Yucatan – needed to be kept out of it. The word 'discretion' had been thrown in about twenty times, including their repetition of their trust in his ability to use it. It had certainly been a conference call from some high-up tower in downtown with lots of old men sitting around the table, men who hadn't a clue what it was like in these places anymore. Men who weren't even sure what the impact of these projects could be on the locals.

Or the impact on the team members, he thought, looking at the dead, decapitated body of his chief geologist sitting on the rocky ledge of the cenote. There were a few Federales present, but they were awaiting his orders. Someone would be tasked with getting the body back to the widow, and making sure she got the benefits that were coming to her. Someone else would be in charge of cleaning up the area around the decapitation since a lot of blood had spilled onto the rocks and was drying in the morning sun.

Tourists would be there in a short while, and while he would be able to convince the company to pay to keep the ruins closed for a day or two, there would soon be a cruise ship coming in; there was no way he could stem that tide. It was already Wednesday, and he was pretty sure that Saturday had a full cruise ship schedule for the upcoming events. That gave him just a few days to sort through what had happened and why.

Skips finally drew in a large breath, one that never seemed to stop entering his lungs, filling up his chest as much as it could bear. Finally, he expelled it over the scene in front of him, hoping that his worries and troubles would somehow escape his person and be left for the ancient Mayans to deal with.

But the body was still there, and the murdered geologist wasn't getting any better looking. He had a short time to find someone to resolve this, and he knew who it would have to be. But he was dreading making the phone call he had already been forced to make before. It was like ordering the World War II veterans back to fight in Korea, or worse, telling an abused wife she had to live in her original home again.

Skips had promised that he would let his friend get a fresh start – that he would leave enough time to heal the wounds of their last trip together. In fact, it had been several years since they had spoken at all, mostly because he was sure that any

form of communication would just remind his old friend of what his life had been like before.

Looking down at his tan, short sleeve shirt, Skips thought about the life he had chosen. He had been a brilliant construction engineer, and now in his mid-forties, he was leading major projects around the globe. This time he had been brought down to the Yucatan, in an eco-friendly and economically wonderful project that he could stand behind wholeheartedly. Sure, being a divisional president left little time for calculations and design work, but occasionally he got to talk with the tradesmen who actually dirtied their hands. It allowed him to remember why he loved engineering so much.

This was the part of the job that he disliked – the random variables that popped up, for which there were no clear answers, no calculation to be done to resolve. Engineering was so much cleaner, so much simpler.

Having decided his course, Skips looked at the body one more time. He and Charlie had not been particularly close, this being their first project together, but they had formed a good working relationship. Since the higher-ups on the project had to stay closer to the site than to their families back in the states they often had evenings free and spent them together. He and Charlie enjoyed several nights talking about some of the larger issues facing the world: globalization, the environment, and the elimination of prejudice. He was especially impressed by Dr. Landry's focus on the last, since geologists were not known to be focused on social causes, but the good doctor had surprised him with his discourse on the need for all men and women to be treated as free and equal.

Thinking of how brilliant and kind the geologist was simply made Skips sad. He turned and walked a few steps away from the cenote and took out his cell phone. Skips had been dreading making this call; he had known all morning long, from the

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conference call with the corporate office until this moment that he was going to have to make it. He dialed the number and waited.

L L L

CHAPTER 2

Professor Alex Guidry was in the farthest possible place from the Yucatan at that moment. Not so much as physically, but mentally Alex was in heaven. His morning lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, were all complete, and he only had office hours and some discussions with Ph.D. candidates to go. Since it was shortly after noon, he was in the one place where he could disappear from the world, and no one would ever find him.

Professor Guidry had been seeking asylum for some time, and the corner seat at Steve's Korean BBQ on Durant was the best place for it. It was a student hangout snuggled in the back of a food court (he had heard it referred to as the 'food ghetto') and it was primarily for people who were looking to get a quick bite to eat. There were never any interruptions from his colleagues, and since no student wanted to talk with their professors more than necessary he was able to live in the moment undetected, as though a ghost in the mortal world.

While the professor did work in academia, he did not have the traditional look. Rarely did he wear tweed jackets or anything with patches on the elbows, and his hair was not the white or gray shock that seemed to top most of the others in his profession. His hair was short and brown, and he was of slight build, with the most notable feature on his face being a pair of glasses. When he got excited his voice went a little higher, but there had been little cause for him to be excited in the last few years since the passing of his wife.

About a decade before, people had commented that he looked a little like Harry Potter, and on years where his day to lecture fell on Halloween he and his wife would dress up as *Harry Potter* and *Hermione Granger*, much to the delight of his students. But that had been so long ago...

Alex mostly just worked now, and attended to his Ph.D. students. As a middle aged man, he was aware that most of the adventure in his life was behind him, and he was comfortable with that, having seen enough in parts of the world that most never go. He had learned to be happy with what he had, and at the moment it was a heaping plate of chicken and rice swamped in Steve's famous Korean BBQ sauce. Alex had decided that the simpler things in life were best, and few things could be simpler than bean sprout salad on the side of a plate of BBQ chicken.

The sleeves of his white button down shirt were rolled up, and he was just bringing up the first bites of chicken with his chopsticks when his cell phone rang. As is so often the case these days, he knew it was a call that he needed to take before he even looked at the phone, before he even knew where the call was coming from.

When the number popped up as something from overseas, he knew in a heartbeat that it was not a call he could afford to miss. As soon as he answered, he heard his long-lost friend's voice coming from God-knows-where, and was sure that his day was going to change drastically.

"Guidry. It's Skips."

With just three words it was all confirmed. Somehow, all Hell was about to break loose in his life again, turning everything upside down, leaving him to seek comfort and shelter to piece his life back together again.

"It's been a long time."

Skips was silent on the other side, trying to decide if he should jump right into the story or have a little more small talk.

He knew his lifelong friend already had figured out that the call was for help, not just for pleasantries. Finally, in as pleasant of a voice as he could muster without sounding too full of it, Skips said, "It's been – what? – since Thailand, right?" He didn't want to bring up...

"No. Eastern Europe," Guidry returned, coldly. "But I know you wouldn't forget that." There was an awkward pause for both friends as the memories boiled back up to the surface before Guidry decided to forgive his friend for the moment and ask, "To what do I deserve the honor of this call?"

"You know, Alex, I always loved that about you. You never wanted to beat around the bush about anything. Before I jump into this, I want you to know how sorry I am that..."

"I know. I got the flowers from you and Kathy." Alex looked around the restaurant and was thankful that the last group of students was exiting with their food, leaving behind only the three guys behind the counter who had been cooking the same barbecued Korean food for the past several decades. "And I appreciate the space you've given me since."

"Look," Skips said, getting back to the point, "I know you don't want to take this call. But I have a situation down here that I need you for." Guidry raised his eyebrows as Skips continued. "My chief of geology was murdered last night here in Mexico."

"So call some Federales. What's it got to do with a professor of Ethnic Studies?"

"Well, it's a little deeper than just a murder." Skips went on to explain it. Dzibilchaltun. The cenote. Giant arrows. The decapitation. The body being wet but not found floating in the water. "I was hoping that you might be able to shed some light on what sort of Mayan thing is going on down here."

"Mayan thing? Man, it sounds like the locals are trying to scare you off so you don't start drilling in their backyard."

"I thought that, too," Skips said, "except that we've been down here for the last two years. This project is almost over. In fact, this phase will wrap up in the next couple of days. The locals have been great to work with, but it's a big deal to have this suddenly happen to us when we're so close to being done. In fact, I'm getting a lot of pressure to have this figured out quickly, and they authorized me to do whatever it takes."

"Including dragging me back into things?"

"You know I wouldn't ask for help unless I really needed it." There was silence on the line. Guidry had better things to do, better places to be than down in the Yucatan chasing after some murderer. However, the call of his old friend was more than he could turn away from. "This will only take a day or two for you, I'm sure. You can check things out, give me some advice, and be back to teach your classes tomorrow if you'd like."

Alex finally asked the question, "And how am I supposed to get down there so quickly?"

"The company's Gulfstream is already en route to the Oakland Airport's private terminal. All you have to do is drive down to Hegenberger, and just before you head into the airport, hang a right. The private terminal is right down there."

Professor Guidry thought about it. He could easily place a call to his graduate assistant to reschedule things until Friday, and take the rest of the day and tomorrow off. It was only a couple hours flight, so he would be able to help this evening and the next morning and be back for dinner on Thursday. He sighed. "I'll see you tonight. And Skips?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for getting me better transportation this time."

L L L

CHAPTER 3

When Professor Alex Guidry stepped off the plane at the private landing strip outside Merida, Mexico the first thing he did was look around for his friend. Since he anticipated only being there for a short time, he had not bothered to go home and pack anything. Instead, he had simply grabbed a light jacket that had been in his car and a pair of sunglasses. Just about everything else he could either live without, or borrow from his old friend.

But Skips was not there to meet him. Instead, walking in the late afternoon sun was a black man with closely cropped hair, a khaki shirt, and large sunglasses. His walk was confident and sure, and when the two met at the bottom of the jet's stairs, the stranger stood at attention and began speaking in a forceful voice.

"I'm here to see you get to the site as quickly as possible," was his way of introducing himself, and he motioned to the parked black SUV with tinted windows that was sitting just off the edge of the runway. Guidry looked at the transportation and smiled, thinking that this was not the common way for professors to travel.

"Well, thanks for the pickup. I would have had a hell of a time walking," he joked. Alex reached out his hand to shake, but the other man simply stiffened.

"My name is Jenkins. I'm the chief of security for the project. Mr. Kane asked me to pick you up since he has been tied up with the...incident...for most of the day. He sends his regards

for not being able to pick you up personally, but there have been some issues with the officials and such, as you can imagine.”

They started walking towards the SUV, and Guidry said, “Well, let’s just leave the politics to the politicians.” When they climbed in and the engine started he asked, “Is there anything you can tell me about the murder?” He was seated in the back seat, and both the driver and Jenkins had been looking straight ahead. At his question, Jenkins turned around to look at him and reply.

“The incident.”

Guidry smiled and shook his head. “Ah, yes. Of course I meant the incident. Because finding a decapitated body in ancient Mayan ruins happens all the time and could not definitively be called murder.” Jenkins turned around, and Alex added, “You never know. Could have been a suicide.”

Jenkins huffed and turned his head to look out the window. He hated these sorts of details. After serving the company in so many places, and after so many dangerous assignments, he was glad to have been given the chance to come down to Mexico. He thought some sun, some tequila, and maybe a *senorita* would be in store for him. For most of the year, it had been easy with very little trouble from anyone, even the employees. But this morning all Hell had broken loose, and he was not sure who could be trusted and who could not. Certainly some hotshot from Berkeley who had been flown in on a private jet was not on the list of people he considered to be on his ‘inside’, and therefore he needed to control the flow of information and interactions.

“Sir, all information about the incident is on a need to know basis.”

“Uh,” Alex said as he tapped the chief’s arm, “what did you say your name was again?”

“Jenkins.”

“Ah, yes. Jenkins, do you think that someone paid an extraordinary amount of money to fly me down here on a private jet so that I would *not* know what is going on down here?” His words were met with silence from the front seat, and he remembered that one of Jenkins’ subordinates was driving the car, so it was probably not in his best interest to completely degrade the man. “Look, I know you think I’m just some jerk from outside who has been called down here to help out. And I am.” Jenkins looked up in the mirror and – ever so slightly – the corner of his mouth was turned up in a microscopic smile. “So the sooner you and I work together, the sooner you can stuff me back on that plane and be rid of me. Sound like a plan?”

Guidry was very proud of himself for turning the relationship around until Jenkins picked up his cell phone, dialed a number, and simply said, “The package has arrived.” He hung up, and kept his eyes locked on the road ahead without speaking another word.

Alex Guidry realized this was going to be a long drive, so he settled back in his seat to enjoy watching the dusty road give way to the mangrove swamps beyond the fringes of the highway.

L L L

CHAPTER 4

When the SUV finally rolled into the fenced in compound, not a single additional word had been spoken. Guidry spent most of the ride wondering what could make a man like Jenkins such a jerk and the rest of it hoping that this would be the last he would see of the security chief. It had been like riding with an angry *Samuel L. Jackson*, only the anger was smoldering under the surface, not manifesting itself in classic lines like, “*Do they speak English in What?*”

The Professor hopped out of the SUV and instantly spotted his old friend. Skips was walking towards him, looking a little better than the last time he had seen him, certainly more well-fed. His skin was much more tanned, but that made sense because he had been working in Mexico. The bright smile flashed up at once as he approached and offered his big hand for a welcoming handshake.

“It’s great to see you, Alex. Thanks again for coming down,” Skips said, pumping the professor’s fist so much it almost rattled his glasses. “I am really grateful that you’d come all the way down here on such short notice.”

“Well, that’s what we do, right?” Alex said. The two of them had pledged the same fraternity together decades ago, and while they weren’t pulling pranks on sororities anymore, they still held that fraternal bond that required them to help out when times made it necessary. And this morning’s phone call certainly sounded as though now was one of those times.

Both the men shook their heads in agreement before Skips spoke again. "Sorry this is such a short run for you. There is some great drift diving over in Cozumel. I know it's not your favorite, but there are some great wrecks to check out too." He continued, "In fact, I even picked up some new gear when I moved down here."

"Yeah, I'd love to have the chance to splash with you, but I didn't bring any gear. I didn't even think to bring my c-card either."

"Maybe if you come down again."

"Maybe. But I hope under different circumstances."

"Yeah," Skips said, starting to walk towards an office that was just a temporary trailer. "These are some strange times. Step inside my office and let me tell you about what is going on." When the three of them went inside Jenkins followed close behind, and Alex sat down and looked around the office. The Spartan decoration and lack of anything personal except one photo on the desk of Kathy and him laughing in Thailand made him know he was in his old friend's company again.

Jenkins sat down in the other chair, Skips lowering himself behind the desk. "I know I gave you some of the details about the killing, but I want to make sure you have the full picture. The cenote in Dzibilchaltun lies in the middle of some ruins, really old Mayan ruins..."

"I've heard about the 'Chaltun cenote more than once," Alex said. "The Mayans were famous for using these ground springs as both sources for water and for ceremonial purposes. They held an almost religious importance to the people. More than one of the classical ruins in the Yucatan has them, but the 'Chaltun cenote is rumored to be the most beautiful." Alex thought about the pictures he had seen from other Ethnic Studies professors who traveled to the Yucatan and took shots of the vibrant turquoise waters in the hole.

"Were they ever used for human sacrifices?" Skips asked, point blank.

"You know, to the best of my knowledge, the cenotes were more used for drinking water or as a draw for water for ceremonies. It wouldn't make sense to put bodies into the same place you're trying to drink from."

"Unless you wanted to draw out their spirits," Jenkins said.

Alex turned to him and said, "No, Mayans liked to do all their religious rituals inside their temples. The temples were constructed to be the centerpiece of each area. When you look at the steps leading up to places like Chichen Itza, they are there to create a very imposing edifice. It's meant to make you feel small and humble in the presence of whatever the building represents, the same way the federal courthouse in New York City has all those steps leading up to it. It's just meant to be imposing.

"So the Maya wouldn't want to have these important buildings, and then do a sacrifice somewhere else, especially someplace common like the watering hole."

The three of them sat in silence for a moment until Alex asked, "What was he working on here, Skips?"

"Huh?"

"What specifically was the man working on? What's the project going on here?" As soon as he asked the question, he knew he was going to get the most thorough explanation about the engineering taking place that was possible.

Skips produced a map and said, "Under a large portion of this area lies oil. For a long time the Yucatan has been wild jungle land, and as that life dies and decays it turns to oil underground. Fast forward a couple of ice ages, and you have these nicely packed pools of oil all over the place. This project has been drilling these little pockets, sucking the oil out, and then moving down the road to the next pool." Skips pointed to the various circles shaded in on the map and said, "We have been

careful to make sure we're only tapping into the ones that have oil. It takes time and money to move the drilling equipment and the rigs, so we don't want to tap into water or natural gas. Not for our purposes here, anyway."

Alex shook his head and Skips continued. "Charlie Landry was our head geologist. He has been working here since the beginning. His job was to ensure that we put the drill in the right spot. But, once we started sucking up the pools he had identified, he was pretty much just following his geologist instincts and playing around with the local rocks. I think he actually said he had a professional interest in the cenotes and their formation."

"How are they formed?" Alex asked.

"Well, there are pockets underground that get formed for one reason or another and then are filled with water. When the water table drops there is no water to hold the roof up, so it begins to collapse. This actually causes further decay in the chamber until the entire roof caves in, leaving an underground pool. Sometimes there is a cave system underneath too, so I'm sure Charlie was having a high-ole' time looking at these things."

"None of this sounds like a reason to kill a man," Jenkins added. While Guidry agreed, he did not like the tone with which Jenkins was using.

"Yeah, I think we are going to have to go and check out the site."

L L L

CHAPTER 5

Just as Jenkins and Alex were getting into the SUV, Skips' cell phone rang. He took the call, and a moment later said, "Guys, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to catch up with you in a minute. I have some things I need to take care of here, but you all go on ahead." As he excused himself and went back into his office, Alex turned and looked at Jenkins.

That quickly, the security chief's face went from stone faced to slightly-arrogant-but-stone faced. With a snap and a point, he ordered the driver to get the SUV going. Again, there was no conversation in the car, and Alex started to get the feeling that, not only was Jenkins unhappy at his arrival, he was going to turn downright hostile.

The professor started to turn over the facts he knew in his mind, beginning to formulate the possibilities. Whenever he had an issue to solve he liked to collect the information he had at his disposal, ask whether there was additional information he could get, form hypotheses about the causes and effects, and finally run a Monte Carlo simulation in his head about possible actions and possible outcomes. It was a very good way of dealing with academic issues, or anything else where he could create a space to analyze.

In part of his calculation about the current situation, he would have to factor in the different personalities of the people involved. He knew he could trust Skips. They had been through Hell and back more than once, and he would not have called just to stab him in the back. The professor was unsure of any

of the security personnel, but he was especially wary of Jenkins. Jenkins had that gruff, I-don't-like-you-no-matter-what attitude, but there was a deeper level than that. Jenkins was clearly anxious about something.

But what?

While it was not impossible that Jenkins was somehow involved with the murder, it was not likely. Skips seemed to know Jenkins well enough that he did not think the chief of security was involved, and he would have been a better judge. But there was definitely something under the cold-hearted exterior that was being hidden.

Guidry thought back to their few minutes in the office together and noted that Jenkins warmed up to Skips, but was cold whenever they were alone. That meant it was personal, that there was something about him specifically that was causing this reaction. Alex asked himself: *can you trust Jenkins?* The answer was an obvious no. He would just have to wait and see how things unfolded with the chief of security before he removed him from the suspect list.

The car rolled on down the highway in silence.

L L L

CHAPTER 6

The hut was dark, though not completely filled with smoke; it would have been difficult for anyone else to breathe. There was little light given off by the candles, making it feel less like home and more like an ancient ceremonial temple. The candles flickered, sending the shadows dancing across the walls, dark with days and days of incense and smoke.

There were no decorations on the walls, and had a random stranger walked into the hut he or she would have never been able to guess much about the past of the man who currently lived there, nor would they really be able to glean any information about his present. Perhaps from the bloodied water in the basin in the corner they may have known he had been in some sort of trouble recently, and from the multitude of traditional items found inside that the owner felt deeply about his culture.

But there was so much more to him. He did not just believe in it the way it is convenient for children to believe in Santa Claus. He had dedicated himself completely to it with a fanatical zeal, forgoing all other pleasures in life to ensure that the single prophecy was fulfilled: mankind would end in a few days' time.

He had spent the better part of the last few years understanding, meditating, and dreaming about the cosmic finish that was coming. Almost two years ago he knew it was coming, the way he knew if a hawk diving for a rat would get its prey or miss just when the bird had begun its dive. He saw this end coming, he saw the prophecy coming true, and had dedicated himself to ensuring that he would be on the right side of things

this time. He had been on the wrong side for so long, it felt as though he were not even sure that a right side existed.

But it did.

He had seen it written, he had heard it spoken of, and when he looked at all the pieces he saw them fitting together. Man had fouled up not only the Yucatan with its cruise ships and pollution, but the entire world. Nothing but wars and strife and famine filled the news, and he knew these were the harbingers. Instead of learning how to get along and live in peace and harmony, man had chosen discord, had chosen violence, had chosen to cast his neighbor asunder instead of loving him as his own family.

And now, for the greed, avarice, and vice, the entire planet would pay. It would have a new beginning, only this one was not going to be caused by Mother Nature; this would be caused by the children themselves. So much for being 'environmentally aware.' They were going to cause their own downfall.

Having already finished his ritual bathing, he sat down on the short stool in front of a small mirror. Quickly, he grabbed the war paint he kept and began to mark his body, looking at each limb and section in the mirror. He had grown hard and lean in the last two years, and the paint dipped down into the valleys between his muscles. When he finally turned the attention to his face, his own features quickly disappeared, the skull face coming to life quickly. It was as though he had been fated to represent Ah Pukuh, the Mayan god of death. His entire reason for being was to personify this head hunter, to possibly be his channel when the world was destroyed.

He was unsure of his future a few days forward, but he knew he played a big part, and that when Ah Pukuh returned he would somehow be rewarded. He firmly believed that. After all the lengths he had gone through, aside from his hunt the night before, he had to be rewarded.

Reaching out, he let his fingers slide over the golden crown he would place on his head. The cold metal reflected well even in the dim light, and he enjoyed knowing it had been worn by Mayan priests more than a thousand years before, being passed down through the ages of the great temples. He had rescued it from one of the local museums, and hunted down the peacocks and flamingos himself to replace the feathers. It was now back at its original beauty, and as he lifted it from the side table he turned to the mirror to watch it descend onto his head.

Once the crown was on his brow, he reached for the last few touches to become Ah Pukuh: the heads of his victims. It had taken some time getting used to, but now he truly heard their voices speaking in his ears, letting him know he was on the right path. He would be bringing the will of his people to bear on the earth once again. Beside him lay the atlatl he had used to spear the geologist the night before, fashioned by his own hands, and the arrows he slung with it stained with the blood of many kills. But last night was the most important. There probably was nothing that could stop his plans now, but to be sure, he would take the atlatl back to the cenote and ensure that nothing else would get in his way.

The geologist had almost spoiled it; he wanted to be sure no newcomers would ruin the events that were destined to transpire.

Ah Pukuh stood up and started to walk out from the hut, but almost forgot—he had yet to put up his prize. Reaching down onto the dirt floor, he picked up the head of the geologist by the hair, and walked outside to put it on a stake in the middle of the road. It cast an eerie shadow in the late afternoon with the mangrove branches looking like they were all twisting away from it in horror.



CHAPTER 7

The walk through the mangroves and underbrush was soul cleansing for Ah Pukuh. Even though he had been fasting and abstaining for the last several days in preparation for the end of the world, he was still able to connect to an even higher spiritual plane by communing with nature. It was as though the two of them were able to discuss that things would never be – could never be – the same again.

When he arrived in Dzibilchaltun, Ah Pukuh had already been moving silently through the growth for some time. He listened in the late afternoon shadows to see if there was anyone on the site before moving close to any of the ruins. For the most part Dzibilchaltun was silent, with the voices of tourists and loud tour buses being unusually absent. He knew it was not because of the events from the night before, but instead that they were all coming that weekend. It was a holy weekend for Dzibilchaltun.

Silently, he crept up the back steps of the longest building still standing, overlooking both the central square and the cenote. There was a pathway that went straight across the top of the steps with little nooks and places to hide, but Ah Pukuh was not ready to hide yet. In fact, his instincts told him quite the opposite: soon his time would be coming to divulge his presence. From his perch atop these ruins, he waited.

The two guards who were at the cenote were oblivious to his presence. He knew he could slay them both quickly before they had a chance to see where he was or fire their guns. But

now was not his time. His people had been waiting a millennium for their prophecy to come true; he did not want to risk ruining it because of his impatience.

Within a few minutes his composure was rewarded. Off in the distance he heard the rumble, but then over the tops of the trees he saw the large SUV coming down the dusty road and into the museum area. A few people exited the vehicle and slowly made their way across the main square and towards the cenote.

His body stiffened. Was there someone other than the Federales who was going to investigate the geologist's death? He had no worries of the Federales; they probably knew it was he, but since there was nothing in it for them to solve the crime they would not be working hard enough to put everything together in a few days. By the time they got around to even asking questions, the world would be ended. But with someone else...

He squinted down to look at the people walking but did not recognize the white man in the group. He thought he had seen most of the men from the oil company, especially those involved with geology, but this was a new face.

They walked over to the cenote, pointed, discussed, and looked around. The body had been removed, but it was obvious even from his vantage point where the slaying had taken place. The rocks were stained red. After several minutes there was the roar of another vehicle, and a matching car pulled up. However, instead of three men as in the first, there was only one, and this one he recognized. This man was important. Big, strong, but still able to be killed.

Ah Pukuh stiffened at the thought of getting the chance to kill this man. He would be supplying the Underworld with fresh souls just before the mass exodus of life from earth happened. Surely he would be in good graces with his master when they met face-to-face in a few days.

It seemed to take the man forever to make his way across the square by himself; Ah Pukuh was feeling impatient. He wanted to know who the new person was, and he wanted to have the chance to kill them all. He did not want to wait. He had acquired a taste for looking into someone's eyes as they realized his image was going to be the last one they would see. The geologist had been no match for him, had hardly put up a fight, but this larger one – this white man would be an excellent trophy to give to the gods in a few days.

He tried to calm himself down and decided he should try and listen in on their conversations around the cenote. Should there be anything important they were discussing, especially anything that could change the flow of events like a small dam diverting a powerful river, and it could ruin the prophecy.

He could not allow that.

Finally the large man reached the cenote and was moving over to be with his friends. Silently, Ah Pukuh slipped towards the back of the ruins and climbed down. In the middle of the ruins there was a tunnel that led through to the other side. An iron gate kept tourists locked out from this dark passageway, but it was just on the edge of the square, only a few feet away from the foliage of the trees that surrounded the cenote. Things were so silent in Dzibilchaltun that he was able to hear their normal conversation from his hiding place and not be discovered.

The skull smiled and listened in on their words.



CHAPTER 8

Is it just me or does the boss always know the right time to call?" Skips said, walking up to Guidry and Jenkins. Their driver had already made his way over to the two security guards who were seated on the far side of the cenote, not paying attention to anything.

While Jenkins did not break a smile, Alex laughed. "Did you find anything interesting yet?" Skips asked him.

Guidry looked down at the red stained rocks and said, "Well, I know where the body was beheaded. And I can see how the body was wet. The fact that it was wet on the front side and not the back indicates to me that he simply fell into the water face first, like a belly flop. If you said he had been struck by a giant arrow, then it's possible that he was trying to reach here for some reason, and then collapsed into the water."

"How do you know he wasn't in the water when he was struck? He could have seen something good, hopped in for a dip, and then was speared," Jenkins said, his affect flat. Alex looked at him. Was he trying to simply be devil's advocate or lead him on to a different path?

"If he had been swimming around, he would have been wet all over. No one climbs into a pool face first for a recreational swim. People get in vertically and then dive in, or they just dive in from the side." Jenkins did not even nod to acknowledge that the point was true. Charlie Landry had to have been hit out of the water and fallen in face first, only to be hauled out a few moments later.

“The question is: why would you want to fall into the cenote to die instead of staying on land? He must have been in incredible pain just to move, so the thought of swimming away, or even being able to float and keep his head out of the water had to be excruciating.” Alex adjusted his glasses and looked at the others, who simply had blank stares for a moment.

To break the silence, Skips said, “I’m not sure why, but I do have some more things for you to think about.” He produced a large manila envelope and handed it over to Guidry. “We had to remove the body just before you arrived because it had been here all day, almost a full twenty-four hours in fact, and the stench was starting to get to everyone. I couldn’t preserve the scene exactly as it was, so I had photos taken. Here they are.”

Alex pulled out the contents of the manila envelope and started leafing through the pictures of the scene and of the dead man. A photograph of the ground showed blood splatters, but they were on leaves. He took a few steps over to the edge of the trees and saw that, still visible in the ground and foliage, were the telltale signs of blood that had been spilled in the last day. The red-brown colors were different from the dirt and the falling leaves.

“He was hit right here,” Alex said. Before Jenkins could speak he said, “It doesn’t make sense the opposite way. If he were in the water and came out, why would he have come over to here, only to be beheaded on the edge of the water?”

Jenkins was silent and clenched his jaw. He obviously disliked feeling that he was being lectured to.

Guidry continued to flip through the photos. He was hoping to get some sort of clue as to why Charlie Landry would have decided to spend the last moments of his life trying to get to the water. He paused for a moment and asked Skips, “Did you find any footprints around here?”

Skips shook his head. "There are so many footprints here, it's impossible to tell whose are whose. But we looked for bloody footprints and didn't find any."

"That's easy," Jenkins said. "The killer is a hunter." The other two looked at him. "Look, if you're used to hunting, then you're used to field dressing. When you kill hogs or deer, you can't go carting all of them back with you, so you pull out some of the pieces and leave them there. Blood gets all over the place, and the first time you do it, you get it all over you too. But after a couple of times, you learn how to stay out of the puddle of blood that forms. So he's someone that has killed something before."

Alex couldn't believe his ears. Jenkins was right – the killer probably had killed before, but he had just confessed that he had the skill to field dress dead animals, and would be able to stay out of the pool of blood. That was not a common skill, and less so on this project. He made the mental note to tell Skips he thought Jenkins was on the short list of suspects as soon as they were alone. To keep from giving himself away, Alex started leafing through the photos some more.

After a few pictures, he stopped on one and held it up. "What's this?"

The other two looked at him and shrugged their shoulders. "His hand?"

"Yeah," Alex started, "but what's this on his fingers?" He pointed to the index and middle fingers on the right hand that were smeared with blood. "None of the other fingers have blood on them. It's not like he plastered his hand over the wound or fell into a pool of his own blood. He has two fingers that had blood on them. And what would you do if you had two fingers with blood on them and had just been shot with an arrow?"

"Hell, that's easy. I'd deliver the one message that I wanted you to know before I died. Who killed me," Jenkins said plainly.

“Or maybe why I was killed,” Skips said. “It still doesn’t make a lot of sense his even being here last night.”

Alex Guidry wandered over to the edge of the cenote and said, “Ok, what do we think we know? We think we know Charlie was hit over here, we think we know he had a message to deliver about who or why this all happened, and we think he went into the cenote on purpose and was fished out shortly afterwards. Right?”

Skips and Jenkins nodded. The engineer said, “Why’d he go to the cenote if he knew he was going to be dragged back out in a second?”

Alex looked down into the water and said, “Because he had to leave his message in a place that the killer couldn’t find it.” Turning back to his companions, he pointed in to the water and said, “Whatever this is all about is sitting at the bottom of the cenote.”

Skips ran his hand through his short cropped hair and looked around. “Ah, sun’s going down already, and by the time we get back here, it’d be a night dive. What do you say we go back, rest up, and rally tomorrow for a dive?”

Alex nodded. “Tomorrow we’ll get to the bottom of this. Literally.”

L L L

CHAPTER 9

Before the three men and the driver started walking back to the SUVs, they decided to let the guards know that they would be back tomorrow. Jenkins walked to the other side of the cenote to deliver the message, and as soon as he was out of earshot Alex whispered to Skips.

"I don't want him here on the dive."

"What? You're crazy. He'll be fine."

"No way. Give him the wrong time now, and I'll explain it to you later tonight. I have a feeling about him."

"He's the chief of security. You want me to keep him out of something like this?" The two of them turned and saw that Jenkins had just finished instructing his people and was making his way back around the cenote.

"Skips, listen. Give him the wrong time now, and if you want to have him along after we've talked, you can give him the updated time." Before the professor or his friend could say any other words, Jenkins arrived and smiled at them. Alex thought it was a fake, forced smile.

"Are we ready to leave now?" he asked.

Skips nodded and said, "Yeah. Let's make sure that we're back tomorrow around 9 am. I'll bring the professor here back, and you take one of the SUVs." Looking at the driver he added, "No additional troops necessary at this time."

As they walked out from the trees shading the edge of the cenote, they each felt open and exposed crossing the wide square. Ruins bordered it on every side, but it still was a wide

open space, and after spending the day discussing another man's murder they each wanted shelter. Looking around, they saw no one or nothing to make them feel uneasy, but it was an emotion that passed through them and did not leave until they were on the other side of the square, safely nestled between two large ruins.

None of them spoke about it. In fact, none of the men shared any words until they were back at the SUVs and Skips said he would take Guidry back to the barracks himself. Jenkins acknowledged the order with a gruff huff, climbed into the SUV with the driver, and they took off down the dusty road.

Once they were inside the SUV, Skips wiggled himself into the driver's seat and said, "Jesus, what a day, huh? I know exactly what you need right now."

Alex raised his eyebrows. While he doubted that anyone knew what he truly needed at that moment, if there were another man on the planet who could understand, it would be Skips Kane. A slight smile came to the professor's countenance. "Oh? And what would that be?"

Skips sneered and said, "Mescal." At the word, the professor gagged, trying to cough up something he had not yet drank down. "Oh, c'mon. That was *years* ago that we had it last, and it wasn't as bad as all that. You even drank a whole bottle of it!" The engine roared to life and he put the SUV into gear.

"I know I drank a whole bottle of it. That's why I can't take the taste. I can't even take the memory of the taste."

"It'll be like riding a bicycle. You never forget the joy of mescal."

"Ugh," Guidry said, feeling green around the gills. "There is no joy in mescal."

"You big baby."

As the SUV roared down the dirt road Alex said, "Now I feel like we're pledges again. Going back to name calling."



From the shadows of the ruin, Ah Pukuh had heard every word that the men had said, except for the short time that the big one and the new one were whispering. But he had heard enough to know that they would be back in the morning. They would be back to dive into the cenote and become helpless, just as the geologist had been helpless in there the day before.

Slowly, quietly, he withdrew from his hiding place, and Ah Pukuh crept out the back of the ruins. His silent movement was more a habit now since there was no need with the inattentive guards being oblivious to his presence.

Stealthily, he made his way through the jungle thicket, over mangrove trails that only the jaguars used, until he was back to his hut. There he made preparations for killing the intruders the next morning. Preparations that would ensure that the prophecy could be fulfilled.



CHAPTER 10

The sun had long since set, and the long shadows of the evening had given way to the pitch black of the night. Only the stars and moon above shed any light on the ground below, cloaking it in a rich, velvety darkness. There were animals prowling outside the complex, but inside most people were getting into their bunks, going to sleep, or writing letters home to loved ones.

Except in the quarters of the big chief. Inside there it was a rumpus going on, a royal ruckus of magnificent proportions. Since the two old friends had decided to forgo dinner and instead dine on something more liquid, they were in another state. Currently, the two of them were singing loudly, pounding on the table, causing the empty beer bottles to fall down and roll around, bouncing each time they pounded more, and spilling some of the smoky liquor onto the bare, wooden table.

As they belted through the verses of their alma mater's drinking song, it took them back, farther back than any two grown men should ever go, to times when there were no real responsibilities, and the damage that time and experience does to one's soul has yet to creep into it. When they finished, they each sipped some mescal and chased it with the local beer, a fine frothy liquid that quenched the thirst caused by the dry and smoky mescal.

"Jesus, this is fun," Skips said, slapping the table, making the beer bottles bounce again. "I feel like we're back in

Patty!" He leaned back in his chair and took a long draw from the bottle.

Guidry had both of his elbows on the table, spread out wide as though he were using them for structural support to keep his head upright. He bobbed back and forth for a few moments and then said, "Patty? You talkin' 'bout Thailan' over there?" Perhaps *said* is too strong of a word. The sentence came out slurred.

"Hells yes, Thailand," he friend returned. Suddenly, without warning, he started laughing uncontrollably, and had to set his beer down. "You – you – you remember..."

Guidry straightened up and pointed at his friend. "Don't you bring it up." He had a slight smile on his face as he repeated the declaration.

"You remember the – the..."

"Don't you..."

"The pig on the bus!" Skips said and doubled himself over in laughter again.

"Bastard!" Guidry slapped the table, and the bottles jumped again. One was precariously close to the edge of the table. "You know that," he started, again pointing his finger at his friend. "You know that the whole thing, that whole event that you just Loooooooooove so much," he belted out, spreading his arms wide, looking up to the ceiling and rocking his head from side to side, "was just because they kept stealing my seat!"

Skips was still laughing. "You use that excuse every time, and it gets funnier year after year." His giggles died down momentarily and then he said, "Even your wife almost pissed herself laughing, it was so funny!"

Guidry smiled at the thought. She had laughed hard when they were all in Thailand, not just at that, but at all the funny things that happened. Her laugh was like silk to him, just smooth and beautiful. She laughed every day with him until...

The smile slid off his face, and Alex was left sitting there in silence, alone in his world of thoughts of her. Skips was still laughing as he took another swig from his bottle, but when he looked back at his old friend, he saw the same look on his face that had been there on his saddest day. He gave him a few moments to think his private thoughts, knowing that he was going back to places that only the two of them had shared, back to things that had happened between them that no one else would ever know about or understand.

Skips thought about his own wife and how lucky he was that she was still alive. He also thought about how painful it must have been for Alex to have to bury his.

"Hey," he said, trying to bring his friend back. "Hey," he said a second time, this time catching the professor's attention. The brightness was back in his eyes; he was in the present again. "Don't, man. Just don't." Skips shook his head, and Alex nodded. It was so easy to slip back into that place, into that deep dark hole whenever he thought about her, but Guidry knew he had to keep moving. He had to drive on, no matter how painful it was to think about losing the love of his life.

"Man, you know I will forever be sorry about what happened in Eastern Europe." Skips was suddenly sober at the thought of their experience together.

Hushed, Guidry replied, "I know."

Skips slapped the table, and the bottles bounced again, this time one of them rolling towards the edge. "Hey, this is gonna be different. We're gonna catch this guy, we're gonna roast him, and we're gonna make sure that there ain't no more funerals because of him. Somewhere out there, there's a wife who has to bury her dead husband this week, and you're gonna be the one who makes it right." The bottle was almost at the edge of the table. "You're gonna keep someone else from dying this time." Right at the edge, the dead soldier paused as though

to see if Skips were going to say anything more, anything else to make his friend feel ok.

In the end, there were no more words to be passed between them on the subject, and the bottle decided to leap over the edge and descend rapidly onto the hard ground below. The sound of the shattering glass startled both of them, and brought them back to the present situation. They were drunk. Dead drunk, and they had to be up in a few hours.

Skips lumbered over to the kitchen sink and grabbed a dustpan and a brush and got all of the shards of glass he could find into the dustbin. He started collecting the other dead soldiers on the table, trying to ensure that he would not have to clean up additional glass from his floor.

Guidry just sat there; slipping back somewhere else silently, like a hand stretching out from the water would recede back in if no one was able to grab it. Skips said something to him about being up at dawn for the dive, but he didn't hear a word of it because he was still in his own world.

When he finally came back a moment later, the spinning in his head had slowed down, but there was still the smoke taste on his tongue and the full belly sensation. The professor looked up at his friend standing there and calmly said, "I hope this is our last adventure together."

He did not know how true those words would be. If he had, Alex Guidry would never have spoken them.

L L L

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The 8th Doll

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When the body of geologist Charlie Landry is found beheaded beside the cenote at Dzibilchaltun, Skips Kane does the last thing he wants to do — he calls his old friend Professor Alex Guidry to help solve the murder. It's not that Skips and Alex have had a falling out, but rather that their last adventure together resulted in the death of Alex's wife. The team begins to look for anything that might help explain the geologist's murder, but their only clue turns out to be a small doll with the number "8" written in Charlie's own blood on the front. Is it a reference to the famed Temple of the 7 Dolls in Dzibilchaltun, or does it have to do with the sighting of Ah Pukuh, the Mayan god of death, and the Mayan 2012 apocalyptic prophecy? The mystery of the 8th doll will take Kane and Guidry down the winding paths of the Yucatan where they will discover the answer to the age old question: what will happen when the Mayan calendar ends?

Other Books by Chris Rakunas

Tears for the Mountain: Delivering Hope after the Earthquake in Haiti



About the Author: Chris Rakunas is a native of Los Angeles, California. His work earned him the Silver Prize at the Dearborn Street Book Festival earlier this year. The inspiration for this book came when he and his wife, Darcey, stood in front of the Temple of the Seven Dolls in Dzibilchaltun in January, 2012. They currently reside in Clinton, Oklahoma. You can follow Chris at <http://www.facebook.com/ChrisRakunas>.



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