

# CHAPTER 1

MEXICO CITY, LATE 1970'S

ROBERT KETRICK

“Here is your scorpion, Senor Ketrick.” The *alacranero* lifted the large jar into view. Bobby smiled in delight as he took the jar from the scorpion hunter.

“Is she a big one?” He raised the jar up to the sunlight streaming into the courtyard below. The *alacranero* nodded and rubbed his dirt stained hands together.

“Si, senor. She is the biggest scorpion I have ever caught. Over 13 centimeters!”

Bobby placed the jar on the stone railing overlooking the courtyard and searched his pockets for money. “How much?”

“Only a few American dollars, senor Ketrick.”

Bobby glared at the tall, wasted teenager with his rotting teeth and his greasy dark hair. “You said one dollar.”

The scorpion hunter became very still. “Senor Ketrick, we had a deal. Five dollars for the biggest scorpion I could find. I am a man of my word. I am proud of my heritage as an *alacranero*. My father has hunted scorpions for twenty years. He has been stung 72 times.”

Bobby frowned. There was no arguing with the Mexican and he had made the deal with the scorpion hunter. Best to pay him and get rid of him. He pulled out a five-dollar bill and thrust it into the young man's hands. “Fine. But, she better be as big as you say she is. This jar magnifies what is in it.”

The *alacranero* grabbed the money and then reached into his pocket for a long set of tweezers. With deft speed, he spun the top off of the jar and reached in to snare the huge scorpion behind its two large front appendages, the pedipalpi.

“Over 1000 people die each year in Mexico from scorpion stings, Senor Ketrick. Most of them are young, like us.” The scorpion came into view, wriggling and snapping its claws.

“I’m fifteen. And, I don’t intend to die from a scorpion bite. The *Centruroides suffusus* is seldom deadly.”

The *alacranero* raised an eyebrow and shrugged. “Very well then.” He grabbed Bobby’s right hand and spread it out then lowered the scorpion into his palm. “If you insist, then take the scorpion. As you can see, it is as large as I said it was.”

Bobby felt his heart race and a fine sweat broke out on his forehead as he watched the scorpion squirm in the tweezers’ grasp. The *alacranero* released the scorpion and with incredibly speed and agility, Bobby swooped down with his left hand and grabbed the scorpion’s tail just below its stinger. He lifted it away from his hand before the thing could sting him.

The scorpion hunter whistled. “That was very good. You would be a worthy *alacranero*, mi amigo.”

Bobby drew a deep breath as he studied the scorpion. “The scorpion and I are very much alike. We are lonesome creatures. We are nocturnal creatures who prefer to battle the world on our own. Our prey fears and respects us. You see, the two of us have an affinity for each other.” Bobby glanced at the scorpion hunter and his mouth hung open in amazement. “You seemed surprised by what I say. Perhaps you should get to know your prey better, scorpion hunter.”

“What will you do with this scorpion?” The *alacranero* placed the lid on his jar and tucked it under his arm.

“Teach someone a well deserved lesson.” Bobby grinned and held the scorpion up in the air close to his face. It squirmed in Bobby’s grasp. He blew his breath on the struggling scorpion. He studied the brown, glistening carapace and the long pincers.

“Senor Ketrick, this scorpion is very large with strong venom. It is over twelve years old! It could kill someone with its sting.” The *alacranero* said.

“That’s the idea.” Bobby frowned at him. “Get lost. You’ve got your money.”

The *alacranero* shook his head and hurried down the stairs from the second floor of the hacienda and into the courtyard. He stopped to cast one last puzzled look in Bobby’s direction and then hurried out into the busy streets of Mexico City.

Bobby glanced at his wristwatch. Lunch was now over and soon Consuela would appear in the courtyard to gossip with the other housekeepers. She was only three years

older than Bobby and yet she treated him like a mere child. He hated her. Her voice grated on his nerves, sent shock waves down his spine.

He would deal with her and study the effectiveness of the scorpion. If it worked, he would take one back to the United States as a prize for his father. His father was thousands of miles away safely tucked in his office penthouse, drinking his whiskey, smoking his cigars and wasting away his life with his many mistresses. It had been so simple to sway his father into sending Bobby to Mexico as an exchange student. And, his father had no idea the real reason Bobby had begged to come to Mexico City. Bobby had come to fulfill his destiny. And, when Bobby found his real 'treasure' he would go back to his father and teach him a lesson in great humility, starting with the scorpion.

Below the balcony on which he stood, the sound of high-pitched laughter filled the morning air. Bobby leaned over the edge of the stone railing and smiled. In the courtyard beneath him, Consuela babbled on and on to one of the other housekeepers.

"Yack, yack, yack." Bobby whispered as his heart raced with anticipation. "I'll shut you up." His eyes were alive with mysterious fire and his face was flushed with excitement. He held the scorpion out over the edge of the balcony at just the right distance. It would fall down to the courtyard below and right into Consuela's . . .

"Bobby? Where are you?" Someone said behind him.

Bobby cringed. How he hated his name. "My name is not Bobby! It's Robert!"

Bobby cut his eyes toward the door to the hacienda. The woman standing there wore a loose, flower-covered dress draped over her pregnant stomach. Her bright green eyes glittered with excitement and she suddenly frowned. "I'm sorry, *Robert*."

There were few people in Bobby's life he had not grown to despise. She was one of them. "I'm sorry. I thought it was one of the kids."

"What are you doing?" She asked.

Bobby turned and held the scorpion out of sight over the edge of the balcony. "Just fooling around."

The woman smiled and gestured over her shoulder toward the interior of the house. "Well, quit fooling around. They found it!"

Bobby squinted. Found what? Then as the realization of her statement dawned on him, his heart raced. "Where?"

The woman ran a hand through her reddish blonde hair and then lowered it to her stomach. “Downtown. At the construction site. Just like you predicted, Bobby. I’m sorry, *Robert*. Can you take me?”

Bobby ignored the squirming scorpion in his hidden hand. Finally! The real reason he had come to Mexico City had surfaced. Literally. “What about the Captain?”

“My husband is already on his way down there. He wouldn’t take me. He said it was too dangerous.” She looked down at her bulging abdomen. “But, I’m the one who suggested it was here in Mexico City. It was my research. My paper. And, your research proved it was buried somewhere in the downtown area.”

Bobby smiled and released the scorpion. “I’ll get the keys.” He hurried toward the door as Consuela began to scream in the courtyard.

Mexico City was teeming with cars, pedestrians, and bicycles rushing headlong in confusion, disregarding traffic lights and stop signs. Bobby threaded the sputtering old car through the confusion toward downtown. “I told you it was there.” He glanced over at this teacher.

She nodded, one hand braced on the cracked dashboard, the other over her stomach. “You are the brightest student I’ve ever tutored, Bobby. I never doubted your research. You have a lot of potential. Have you ever considered archeology?”

Bobby laughed. “No. My Dad wants me to follow in his footsteps.”

He felt her eyes on him. “Run his oil company? You’ve got a much brighter future, Bobby. Something special is planned for you. You just have to see the opportunity when it comes and grab it.”

Bobby glanced at his reflection in the cracked rearview mirror. Although he was only fifteen, he looked like an adult with jet-black hair. He had the high forehead of an extremely intelligent man and eyes the color of a deep green sea. But, his father did not think of him that way. His father thought he was a fool.

“Too bad my father doesn’t agree with you.”

The woman sighed as they swerved around a stalled truck in the middle of the road. “I’m sorry. That was thoughtless of me to bring up your family.”

Bobby frowned and tried to focus on the road ahead. “That’s OK. I’ve gotten over it.”

“How do you get over your mother committing suicide?” She asked.

Bobby glanced at her and felt the old uneasiness grip his stomach. He swallowed. “She couldn’t get over shooting my father. But, he deserved it. She didn’t.”

“How can you say such things about your own father?”

Bobby felt his face heat up with anger. He licked his lips. “He is a drunk. He routinely beat my mother and me. I was only eight. She was trying to protect me.”

Silence filled the car and Bobby slowed as the traffic thickened. The woman sniffed and he turned to see tears trickling down her cheeks.

“Are you OK?”

“I’m so sorry, Robert. I just hope my child never knows such treatment. You’re a very brave young man to go on with life after all of that.”

Bobby sighed as an unfamiliar feeling of comfort came over him. This woman who had been his tutor the past few months had become more of a mother to him than the woman who had died in a pool of blood when he was eight. Maybe he could stay here in Mexico. Maybe he didn’t have to go back to Louisiana and carry out his plan for his father. “Christine, you mean a lot to me. You’ve . . .”

The woman’s face twisted with fear and Bobby jerked his gaze away from her as he slammed on the brakes. He had started the car moving again and now barely stopped before plowing into the old bus stopped in the middle of the road. His thoughtless musings had almost cost him his life. He had to put the sentimentality aside and focus on his goal. He spied a break in the cars along the sidewalk and parked at an angle in front of the old buildings in downtown Mexico City.

“You said I should grab that opportunity when it comes? Well, I think today may be that day.” He smiled at her and opened the door of the car. He dodged the swirling traffic and dashed down the sidewalk toward the construction site, leaving his teacher behind.

For weeks, Bobby had felt a sensation tighten and grow within his gut as if something was coming. Something meant just for him. Week after week digging through ancient manuscripts under the careful eye of his tutor had paid off. He had sensed, no, he

had *known* the thing he sought was there under the ground, buried, waiting just for him. And now, workers digging ditches for new electric cable in the heart of Mexico City had found that something. Something ancient. Something evil.

In the downtown area, the excavation site marred the concrete and steel, an open wound into the earth. He pushed his way past the curious onlookers and flashed his museum I.D. to gain access to the site. A group of men from the archeology office stood on the edge of the pit and their excited voices babbled on about the find. Bobby ignored them and slid down a ladder into the cool, dark past.

Sunlight slanted into the depths of the pit and the smell of old, sodden earth filled his nostrils. Something about this pit excited him, sparked within him a new anticipation of power, of destiny. He pushed his way between two men and stared down at a huge, round, flat rock covered with the figure of a woman carved into ancient stone. The horrific scene thrilled him. The image of the severed head, the torn arms, the separated legs, and the torso of a woman covered a stone disk almost 11 feet in diameter. The woman wore only jewelry and a serpent belt adorned with a human skull. The men from the archeology office chattered around him, their voices filled with theories and possible explanations. But, the young man's eyes stay riveted on the wounds carved into the stone, on the severed limbs. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned.

“What are you doing here, Bobby?”

Bobby pushed his dark hair back out of his eyes and stared into the face of the Captain. He was a bit shorter than Bobby, bright blue eyes filled with power. He owned the local museum where Bobby had come for the summer. He was a relentless, tyrannical man with more strength and fortitude than Bobby's father would ever have. The man's gaze did not waver beneath his wide brimmed panama hat and he puffed on a peculiar Meerschaum pipe.

“I wanted to see the find.” Bobby motioned toward the stone disc.

“And, he brought me.” Christine appeared behind the Captain her face flushed with the exertion of chasing Bobby.

The Captain pulled his pipe from his mouth. “I told you to stay at the hotel. We're leaving in the morning and I don't want anything to happen to our baby.”

She ignored him and peeked over his shoulder at the stone disc. “But, I had to see it. You know my paper is almost finished. I was right. It was here all the time. And, Bobby helped me find it. I just had to see it. It will be at the heart of my thesis.”

The Captain put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back toward the ladder. “Well, now you’ve seen it and we’re going back to the hotel.”

The woman carried a macramé purse slung on her shoulder and she reached inside and removed a camera. “At least let Bobby take some pictures for me.” She handed the camera to Bobby. “For the paper, Bobby. Will you please?”

Bobby glanced at the camera. He had no interest in taking pictures. Just moments ago, he would have done anything for Christine. But now, all he wanted was to touch the stone disc. However, if the Captain took his wife back up the ladder, it would distract him from stopping Bobby. He took the camera and gave her his best smile.

“I’d be happy to. You go on with the Captain and take care of your baby. I’ll take the pictures for you.”

The Captain put his pipe back in his mouth and clenched down on it with ferocity. His eyes raked across Bobby one last time as he directed his wife back toward the ladder. Bobby tossed the camera aside and turned back to study the stone disc.

“I’m glad you managed to pull that one off. The good captain would have had you back at the museum without ever touching this precious stone.” Someone whispered in his ear.

Bobby glanced up. A man towered over him, his pale, white skull devoid of hair. His face was youthful but his red eyes bore the weight of years. He wore a long, black coat over a black shirt, open at the throat. The edge of a tattoo could be seen just at the edge of the shirt. A scar the shape of a star marred the pale flesh of his left cheek. “What do you see?”

Bobby studied the bright, fiery eyes. “I’m not sure. But, it’s wonderful.”

“It is isn’t it? No one seems to understand it.”

“But, you do?”

“Yes. I do.” The man’s red tongue darted over his teeth. “Would you like to know more about it?”

Bobby nodded as his mind filled with excitement and anticipation. He felt as if he were on the verge of a monumental development, as if his entire life had led to this moment. The man pointed to the image of the mutilated woman.

“This woman’s mother became pregnant. The new child within her mother was a boy, an heir to great power. This woman could not abide such a threat to her power from her unborn brother. She was jealous and plotted to have her mother killed so the child would never be born. But, someone told the unborn child.”

Bobby felt something stir within him, an anticipation, an excitement unlike anything he had ever felt. His hands trembled in anticipation. His forehead beaded with sweat. His heart raced. “He wasn’t happy his sister wanted him to die, was he?” He whispered.

The pale man smiled. “No, he was not happy. In fact, so powerful was this new ruler that he sprang forth from his mother’s womb fully grown. His rage knew no limits. He took a large, golden knife and he hacked his sister to pieces and threw all but her head down the mountainside.”

Bobby’s eyes glittered with excitement as he watched the man’s scar glow with the crimson flush of blood. He closed his eyes and savored the story, saw the attack on the unsuspecting sister; smelled the blood flowing. He licked his lips in anticipation. “What was the man’s name?”

The pale man smiled and his face glowed with triumph. “He was not a man. He was a god. And his name is one you’ll grow to love and revere. Would you like to know more?”

The teenager nodded, his life now irrevocably altered, driven down a new, deadly path of his own choosing. “Yes!”

“What is your name?”

“Robert. Although most people call me Bobby.” He frowned.

“You shouldn’t let people talk down to you, Robert. You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No. I’m from the United States.” His eyes strayed back to the stone disc.

“What part?” The pale man leaned toward him.

“Shreveport, Louisiana. My Dad owns an oil company there.”

Bobby watched the pale man lean away from him and his eyes drifted to gaze up at the edge of the excavation pit. “Have you ever heard of a little town called Lakeside?”

Bobby nodded. “Yeah. It’s just north of Shreveport. Are you from Louisiana?”

“Oh, no. But, I’ve heard of the alligators and the swamps and I hear the hunting is good.” His gaze remained pointed upward and Bobby looked toward the rim of the pit. The Captain stood on the edge of the pit with his pipe clenched in his teeth and his arms crossed over his chest.

“Bobby, come with me. Now.” His voice drifted down into the pit.

“I’ll be right there.” Bobby shouted up to the man. He bent over and picked up the camera and began to snap pictures of the disc.

The pale man looked away as the Captain walked away from the pit. “Oh, yes, Lakeside. I’ve been there, you know. It has wonderful secrets. Have you ever seen a water moccasin?” His gaze returned to Bobby. Bobby lowered the camera.

“Yes. We call them cotton mouth snakes.”

The pale man smiled. “Yes. They have the most perfect white mouth with fangs that you can hardly see. And, before you know it, they strike.” The pale man took the camera out of Bobby’s hands and motioned toward the stone disc. “Let me get a picture of the famous Robert Ketrick in front of his find.”

Bobby nodded and stood in front of the disc and his mind filled with pride and excitement. “It is my find, isn’t it?”

The camera clicked in the pale man’s hands. “Oh, yes. It was your destiny to find it. It was put here for a reason. And, you are that reason. Robert, you have a great and glorious future ahead of you.”

Bobby took the camera from the man’s bony hands. “Yes, I do. I just know it.”

“You must strike while the opportunity presents itself.” The pale man smiled and exposed glistening white teeth.

Bobby looked into the man’s red eyes. “Yes.”

“Starting today.” The pale man glanced down at the stone and pointed. “Look.”

A small, brown scorpion scurried out from under the edge of the carving. The man picked up the scorpion and its body wriggled in panic. He held the scorpion above his open mouth just as Bobby had held the scorpion over Consuela. The man slurped and

with one fluid motion swallowed the arachnid. He smiled and pulled aside his shirt to expose the right side of his upper chest. "Watch." He whispered.

Bobby felt his heart race in anticipation and amazement as the tattoo of a scorpion appeared on the man's skin. He gazed up into the man's red eyes and for a second something dark appeared. It was a spiral, beginning just below the man's right eye and winding its way in a hypnotic coil around the man's eye to end just above eyebrow. It slowly faded as the man's eyes turned from the snake tattoo back to Bobby.

"Yes, a sign." The red eyes gleamed. "You belong to me, now."

Bobby held out the camera to a passing archeology office worker. "Can you take our picture? *Por favor?*"

The worker took the camera and nodded. The pale man put an arm around Bobby's shoulders and where his flesh touched Bobby's neck it felt as cold as ice. Bobby shivered as the officer worker snapped their picture.

"I'd better get back to the museum. The Captain will be waiting for me." Bobby looked into the eyes of the pale man.

"Of course. Would you mind if I came by later to talk?" He said.

"No. I'm staying in the hacienda beside the museum."

The pale man placed his hands behind his back and turned away. Bobby cast one last longing look at the disc. He leaned forward and let his hand stray across the rough stone. It felt like electricity danced up his arm and he gasped and he drew in a deep breath. For a second, he saw the woman's body, saw the blood, smelled the ancient odor of fear and evil. He smiled and scrambled up the ladder from the pit.