



Amy C Fitzjohn

Dunhaung, China 1908 - An archaeologist discovers an ancient temple, but the legendary library rumoured to be at its heart is what he really wants to find.

The present - Archaeologist, Dr Sasha Blake has been studying a replica of an ancient manuscript. Offered sponsorship by a wealthy silk trader, Jon Solomon, she is desperate to locate the original and four powerful rings that accompany it.

But her investor is hiding terrible secrets. When Sasha becomes one of his victims and begins to realise the truth about Solomon, she becomes the bait in a web of conspiracy set up by The Agency, and Agent Tom Sheridan is her only ally.

Can Sheridan and Blake find the manuscript in time to stop Solomon, or are they about to fall into his trap?

SECRET LOCATION SOMEWHERE IN PARIS PRESENT DAY

Tom Sheridan gazed down the corridor, an unlit cigarette dangling between his fingers.

He watched while his men dragged the hooded and bound detainee towards the holding cell. She fought them as they bundled her towards him.

He didn't know why he'd taken up smoking again, all he knew was he enjoyed the head rush and warmth in his throat. It made him feel alive, when mostly all he felt was numb.

His hands were trembling, he needed the reassurance and the kick right now, but would have to wait until after the interrogation.

He slid the cigarette into his shirt pocket and folded his arms, steadying himself, building up courage.

He'd done this a thousand times. Usually the people he questioned were real scumbags, they deserved what was coming to them. But not this time. This one would be the worst of his career. This one meant something.

THE PAST

DUNHUANG, CHINA - MARCH 1908

Marc Aurel Stein pulled his coat tighter, opening the folds and sending sprays of dust into the icy wind. His face wrapped in woollen scarfs, his hands packed into several pairs of gloves. The wind needles on flesh.

The dirty blur on the horizon, he'd thought was a distant saddle of rock, was coming into focus. The wind began to drop almost as quickly as it had whipped up from the Taklamakan desert, and with it, the Hungarian-British Archaeologist and his team's spirits lifted.

A thousand miles. Through desert, precarious mountain passes, jagged gorges and the impossibly vast grasslands of the Asian Steppe. Following in the footsteps of his hero, the great monk Xuanzang, the most anticipated moment of this expedition along the Silk Road was almost upon him.

As he led his caravan to the gates of the mud brick citadel of Dunhuang, he was dreaming about a warm bed and a hot meal. He rehearsed what he needed to say in his mind, piecing together fragments from the dialects he had picked up along the year-long journey. He had always been plagued by what he called the eel-like perplexity of Chinese phonetics on his unmusical ears.

Managing to make himself understood by the brusque guards at the gate, his party was harried through.

Stein had imagined these people would welcome his group of hungry paying visitors to their humble community, but there was a sense of unrest in the air. People viewed them with suspicion. Leather faced women in brightly coloured woollens whispered in huddles and threw sceptical glances. While on his travels he'd heard tales of citizens on the verge of rebellion here. People liked to gossip, but there seemed some truth in it. He clutched the pouch at his belt, heavy with reassuring coin.

He drew his camel to a halt and she grunted in relief. He dismounted and uncovered his face, displaying a broad

smile and bristling moustache as he stepped towards the clutch of local elders waiting to receive them.

He took out his passport and in disjointed local tongue explained enough. His passport wrongly identified him as 'Minister of Education for Great Britain' and had earned him a good deal of leverage to this point.

Immediately deferential, the leading elder explained he was the city magistrate, apologised they had not prepared an appropriate welcome for a man of his stature, and set about organising an army of scurrying assistants to cater to their every need.

"Foreigners don't visit us often. You honour us, Sir," said the Magistrate in his own language which Stein just about understood, "Is there anything you seek our assistance with?"

The Archaeologist mulled the question over for a moment. Making the decision to forego food and rest. The adrenalin was still powering through his limbs and the excitement of being so close was overwhelming.

The caves, and the mysterious library, were waiting out there in the desert for him.

"Mr Magistrate," he began, in the best Chinese he could manage, "you are very kind. We are here to see the Caves of a Thousand Buddha's."

The magistrate, who was about his height and stature, pinched his face with confusion.

"The Caves of a Thousand Buddha's?" Stein repeated, in his most considered Chinese, but the man shrugged and looked to his companions for assistance.

Stein turned to his interpreter, Chiang-ssu-yeh, who stepped forward, abruptly finishing his hushed conversation with one of the labourers from the caravan, and nodded to the magistrate. The two men exchanged a flurry of lyrical words, too quickly for Stein to keep up with. He waited, as patiently as he could manage for the two men to finish.

"What did he say?"

"He say, this is fine. He will take us there. He get camels and some provisions and meet us at the gate in one hour. He say we go to tavern first if we need food and rest."

"Splendid!" said Stein, smiling widely at the magistrate and offering his hand.

He thanked him in his language, bowing respectfully then ushered his party away to take a short break before they returned to the saddle.

*

The Caves of a Thousand Buddha's were ten miles out of town, along a dry river bed and through rocky scrubland. The cold had dissipated and Stein rode at the head of the caravan beside the local guide in loose robes glistening in the early evening mist. They passed a grove of bare elm and poplar trees before approaching a towering cliff. It was honeycombed with hundreds of hand hewn grottoes, long forsaken temples devoted to a bygone era. Ragged silk scarves left by pilgrims fluttered a multicoloured wave. Made more vibrant when set against the barren landscape of sandstone cliffs and soaring dunes.

He had imagined how magnificent this place could be, but he hadn't prepared himself for this.

Inside the caves it was spectacular. His eyes widened and took in carved and brightly painted archways cut into the rocks leading to a maze of catacombs, each more spectacular than the last. Rock, in situ, carved to rival the grandest cathedrals and classical architecture in the world. A spontaneous bout of laughter rattled through him. He'd powered into the cave, determined, confident, only to find himself humbled and speechless.

Bright pigments formed into a dreamscape of icons, faces, fanciful animals and dragons. He worked his way through the tangle of corridors and meditation caves in silent reverence. He ducked through an archway and the space opened up to a massive hall.

"G..g..good Lord," he said. He took a step back and looked around, his legs feeling weak and wobbly.

"Mr Stein, should I set up the camera?"

He flicked a stern look at his young apprentice, who was stumbling through the caves behind him laden with bags and a tripod.

"Be careful, boy!" he shouted, his voice amplified in the cavernous space.

"I'm sorry, sir," the young man put his pack down on the floor. "Well, that is mighty impressive," he said, stretching upright with his hands on his hips, "That is the

largest statue I think I have ever seen. It's good isn't it?" he said, smiling enthusiastically.

"Good? It's good?" Stein's face was set with an exasperated frown, "This could be the greatest find of my career. And all you can say it that it's good?" he hissed, shaking his head he stepped closer to the enormous, intricately carved reclining Buddha. He fiddled with his moustache as he leaned closer, examining the fine detail.

"How can I help?" chirped the young man.

"You can start by being quiet." He glanced around at his apprentice.

Tall and spindly, Frances was an awkward boy with a tendency to be clumsy. Stein hummed while he thought about how to occupy him.

"You could set up the Brownie over there, in the middle, where there is plenty of room and you have little chance of breaking anything!" he raised an eyebrow at the boy, "be off with you lad, and let me work."

He took a pencil and some parchment from his pocket and proceeded to take a rubbing of the carvings on the side of the statue, his lips fluttering as he passed a narrative through his head of the story behind this find.

The din of the rest of his team, reverberating down the halls as they discovered the caves for themselves, faded into white noise. His mind was full, tripping over itself with the enormity of it. He could spend the rest of his career methodically examining every part of this hall and its adjoining rooms, let alone the rest of the complex, and the mysterious library he had heard about but was yet to see evidence of. He had almost forgotten the stories about the library and its reputedly irascible custodian, a monk by the name of Wang Yuanlu. That was why he was here, but for now, it faded from thought.

"Is my camera set up yet, Frances?"

"Almost," a grunt, a pause and a clatter, "There. All set, sir."

For the next few hours Stein's team were organised and set to work, cataloguing, making images, notes and taking pictures. Before long the room was filled with a haze of dirty metallic smelling smoke.

As night drew in, the team were forced to stop work and leave the caves when a local man was sent by the magistrate to warn them of an impending storm.

Their work, and the undiscovered library, would have to wait until the morning.

PART 1

THE PRESENT

SIX MONTHS AGO VICTORIA ROOMS, BRISTOL

Jon Solomon scratched the base of his skull, enjoying the temporary relief despite the knowledge it would be sore in the morning. His eczema always played up when he came back to England. Within twenty four hours the dampness in the air was already weighing heavy on him. He was counting the hours until his Gulfstream G450 touched down back in Nice.

He was, however, looking forward to seeing this particular speaker. He'd been following her career for a while and had seen to it his company, Solomon's Silks, sponsored part of this event for Bristol Festival of Ideas.

He glanced at his Brietling watch. Less than five minutes to go and people were still spilling into the auditorium. He shook his head; why did so many people insist on arriving at the last minute? Events like this should be savoured, not rushed at like an inconvenient appointment.

He'd taken his seat twenty minutes ago, keen to get a good position. He stifled a yawn, feeling the effects of the Champagne.

The lights faded, and with it a hush descended. A cough, someone's mobile chirped and he tutted, then quickly checked the inside pocket of his suit jacket to make sure his was off. He crossed his legs, threaded his fingers around his knee and waited.

A bank of stage lights, suspended in circles overhead, clunked into life, spilling light onto the far wall. The room fell silent. The clack of stilettos as a tall, slim woman with bouncing blonde curls crossed the stage and

stepped up to the podium. She cleared her throat and nodded towards the back of the room.

The lighting changed and a spotlight pooled around the events keynote speaker.

She shuffled her notes, tapped the microphone and split second of feedback pierced the room.

"Sorry!" she said with a nervous giggle, "Good evening," she smiled and nodded, hundreds of pairs of eyes watching her. She took a sip of water, as if she could dilute her nerves, she cleared her throat and pressed the clicker for the first slide.

"I am Doctor Sasha Blake. First of all, I would like to thank the University of Bristol for inviting me to speak tonight, at this, the spring season of the Bristol Festival of Ideas. Over the next few weeks, the city plays host to many fascinating and inspiring people. Experts in their field; writers, thinkers and the just plain curious, speaking in a series of events. This evening I am going to talk to you about an ancient manuscript and an even older mystery. I'll do my best not to disappoint."

A ripple of laughter echoed around the panelled hall.

"For those of you who would like to find out more, I have plenty of copies of my book on the subject and I am happy to take questions at the end and sign books for you."

Jon tugged at the thighs of his trousers and sat up straight.

On the screen behind Dr Blake, a scanned image of a photocopied document flashed up. It was blurred, faded and torn in parts - but handwritten, unmistakably in Greek. She waved a laser pointer at the screen and turned, leaning to the microphone, the pointer following her gaze. He enjoyed her fluid movements, as she rested lightly on the podium.

"We have found what we believe to be an unknown text written by the Greek Philosopher, Democritus."

She let the revelation hang. Jon expected to hear gasps or whispers in the audience, but it felt like he was the only one who knew what this meant.

A copy of a manuscript two and a half thousand years old. Things like that didn't just turn up in people's attic any day of the week. The question was; was it genuine? Or an elaborate hoax? And what kind of fool would place crumbling papyrus into a photocopier? But what it meant was the original text was potentially out there and had been

known about since the invention of photocopier almost sixty years ago.

Jon felt his skin tingling. The thoughts rattled around his head. He had an idea of what Dr Blake was going to talk about this evening, but to see it...finally. His eyes stung from concentrating on the illuminated screen.

"Democritus is considered the father of modern science and was best known for his work with Leucippus on Atomic Theory - the idea all matter is made up of discrete units called Atoms," Dr Blake explained, "The theory was adopted in the 19th Century when chemists began identifying elements, but was popularised by the Romans. Of course, here in Bristol, we can lay claim to one of the greatest modern thinkers in the field of Atom Theory in the shape of Paul Dirac."

He glanced around the audience. A few of them reacted to the Bristol connection, which interested him far less than the manuscript itself.

Then she looked his way. He swore she was looking directly at him, as if she had zoomed in on him. Like she was talking directly to him. That she knew, he knew...

A smile flickered across her face. A connection. A real connection. His throat swelling.

For the benefit of the rest of the audience she spelled out why the manuscript was important. But the words washed over him.

"This text is one of the few known writings in existence by Democritus himself. Most of the writings about his life and his work had come from other sources, such as Plato and Aristotle."

He felt himself nodding minutely.

She clicked to the next slide.

"Here you can clearly see the word Atomos in ancient Greek, meaning indivisible. And here, he talks about a new type of atom he cannot attribute to his senses. Democritus likened the different atoms to what his senses told him - for example, he proposed water atoms were slippery and salt atoms were sharp and spiny. Of course, I am no expert on particle physics, I'm an Archaeologist, the existence of the text itself and the clues it gives us about this man's life are what fascinate me."

She clicked to the next slide and swirled the green dot around some clearer passages of text. He could see she was

into her stride now, her delivery becoming more passionate and fluid.

"More interestingly is this," she aimed the dot around at a faded sketch, "It appears to show some form of container, and inside the container are layers. A package, or a box."

She paused.

Jon swallowed and scratched at his neck again, more from habit. This was it. This was what he wanted to know about. The box. A box taken from a sacred site in 1998, and then disappeared - Sasha Blake looked guilty as hell.

BRISTOL

He tries to control me. He thinks he has the strength, but we both know it's all a façade. I give him his strength. He wears a mask over me so the world sees what he wants it to see. All the while, I'm there. Looking through his eyes. Watching. I feel what he feels and more.

I feel it now. The energy. Doing delicious things to me. A desire. It's pulsing.

I'm watching her. I'm always watching.

Her movements are feline in their grace. She is lithe and supple. Her creamy skin shimmers like his best silks. He can have the fabric, I'll have the flesh.

I'll take what I want. I always have.

But not yet.

It's too soon.

My lips are dry and I slide my tongue around them.

I ignore the itch. But Jon still scratches.

We both listen. She is in the spotlight. It gilds her curls with an opalescent halo.

My angel. My demon.

Her red lips form shapes, her throat forms words from her brilliant mind.

He closes his eyes and I see.

She mines her rich vein of knowledge but only shows her audience a glimpse of it. She knows much, perhaps too much. She knows more about the rings and the box than she is telling us. She is hiding things from us, I see it in her eyes. I see more of her than she needs to know. She fascinates me. I want to know more.

I want to be there. In her green eyes. But not yet. It's too soon. I must allow him to play out the social overtures first. There is more I must do before she sees me. In the shadows, I will stay.

Jack comes out of the box later.

VICTORIA ROOMS, BRISTOL

Sasha was acutely aware of how sore her feet were. Everything was closing in around her.

It was the image. Whenever she looked at this sketch her head was flooded with confusing memories and her world shrank.

She glanced at the audience, who were waiting patiently for her to continue and noticed the man in the expensive suit on the front row. He had dark blonde hair and a sparkle in his eye. He seemed to be hanging on her every word, leaning forwards and staring intently at her.

She was sure he was smiling encouragement. She swirled the laser pointer at the screen once more, looking away to avoid his eyes, but still felt them boring into her. She swallowed and continued her talk.

"This artefact is of interest to me," she pointed at the box. That terrible, frightening and unnerving box from her past, "In the text, Democritus describes a box in which unidentified atoms appear to be contained. This is the point where Archaeology and Physics collide."

She took a sip of water and cleared her throat before flicking to the next slide. More disjointed Greek text. She felt better without the image of the box in front of her, she could concentrate again.

"How are these connected? That's exactly what myself and my team are trying to uncover."

She paused and looked at the audience. Silence. A couple of muted coughs.

"To help decipher what Democritus seems to be describing in the text, we contacted the Center for Theoretical Studies at the University of Miami and linked up with Dr Harry Schafer."

She paused, smiled, then flicked to the next slide.

There was an image of a media player window, a bearded man's face with a big play button in the centre. She tapped the touch screen on her podium and started the video.

A rising crescendo of orchestral music filled the room and came to a dramatic halt before Dr Shafer began to speak.

She found herself watching the video of her colleague, although she'd seen it hundreds of times. He flashed a cheesy smile at the camera then adopted his serious look once more. She found it hypnotic how his beard seemed to twitch a millisecond before every word. He was in his 40's, only a little older than her, but his dowdy shirt, tweed jacket and bushy amber beard made him look ten years older. He was sat in front of a blackboard smothered in impossibly complex chalked equations.

Sasha glanced out to the audience once more, watching their reactions.

Harry's video described the unidentified atom Democritus had unwittingly discovered all those millennia ago and the fact the box seemed to act as shielding from radiation - a concept unknown to science until the twentieth century.

When the video ended, she clicked to the next slide and made reference to a couple of Dr Schafer's published books and papers before moving on.

The next slide showed some sketches of four rings.

She had debated whether to mention the rings in her talk, but made the decision to gloss over the subject.

"Somehow linked to this new element are these rings. Each one represents the four elements as were understood in classical antiquity - earth, air, fire and water - suggesting Democritus viewed the contents of the box as an unknown element - Somehow, ironic his understanding of what was an element is so close to what our understanding is today." She flashed a grin at the audience. Nothing. A couple of people were starting to look tired and bored now. She had planned to expand on more of the translations but thought better of it. This seemed a good point to wrap up, at least the audience could then have more time to ask questions.

She was momentarily distracted by movement at the back of the room. Before the house lights came back up, someone in the audience was already leaving.

She watched the figure slink out, a cat on the prowl. Something about the way he moved disturbed her, in his gait perhaps, or the urgency of his motion. A shadow from her past.

A blink, and he was gone, like a whiff of expensive aftershave. Goose bumps pricked up her spine.

She shook it off and painted on her hostess smile. She took questions from the audience for another quarter of an hour before the fragmented mass of people started to break away.

One person waited behind - still sat in their seat on the front row, legs crossed and fingers laced around their knee.

She gathered up her notes and looked up when she sensed him approaching her.

"Dr Blake?"

She flashed a slightly startled smile at him.

"Good evening. I saw you in the front row - you looked as though you enjoyed my talk," she said, her smile becoming more confident.

She shifted into the appropriate persona, hopeful he would buy a book. She'd only sold one so far tonight.

"I did. And I thank you. Please allow me to introduce myself; my name is Jon Solomon," he held a hand out to her, accompanied with a winning smile.

She took it firmly. Time to turn on the charm.

"Ah, so you are our very generous benefactor? No, no sir, I must thank you. Without the much needed financial injection from Solomon's Silks this event wouldn't be possible."

"You're too kind. But I'm certain a woman as resourceful as you would find another way. Some other sucker with a chequebook and a fascination with old mysteries," he flashed a wolfish grin that lit up his face. It made him look friendly, trustworthy.

First impression; she liked him and stifled a smile.

"Nevertheless, thank you for the support," she nodded graciously.

"You are very welcome."

He rocked on his heels and drove his hands into his trouser pockets, "Dr Blake, forgive me if this sounds a little forward, but do you have any plans now? I am keen to discuss your project further with you, if you would indulge me?"

She was bewildered for a moment. She had been poised to hand him a book but hesitated.

"Oh.. well...urm. Mr Solomon..."

"Jon, please. Call me Jon."

She flapped her mouth open then clamped it shut before responding, "I didn't have any plans. Nothing beyond Domino's Pizza and a DVD."

She smiled at him, flattered and curious about him in equal measure, "I could certainly spare you some time to talk further. Would you like a book?"

She waved towards the teetering tower of gleaming hardbacks.

"I already have one actually. It's well-thumbed. Another time, it would be great to get it signed?"

"I'd be happy to."

"Excellent. Shall we head out to dinner then?" Jon hovered an arm behind her, beckoning her towards the door.

Her cheeks felt hot and she looked away.

"Why not," she flashed a smile and he took the lead.

She followed him out through the atrium and onto the entrance steps. The flagstones beyond the Bath stone colonnade shone with moisture, like stained pages. The headlights of a car flicked on ahead and dazzled her for a moment, the light splattering along the pavement.

They glanced at each other briefly. A smile flickered across his lips, before they stepped down onto a drizzly Queens Road.

QUEENS ROAD, BRISTOL

He'd been watching her for a while now. Watched her talk from the back of the room and left just before the end, minimising the chance their paths might cross or she would see him in the crowd.

He couldn't risk it, there was too much at stake.

He'd been keeping track of her movements for years now, even before he had worked with her. Passively observing from a distance. Read all her publications, academic papers and even the poor attempt at fiction she'd written. Tracked her career, collected pictures, recorded her voice, seen her movements on security cameras. He already knew her long before they met.

But it was during those torrid and emotionally turbulent months when they had been thrown together, he started to see her for who she was, to be able to influence her in ways he had only imagined before.

They both owed each other their lives back then. The times when he felt alive. When his life had a purpose.

He was itching for a cigarette. He hated being in a smoky car, but a mist of rain clung in the air outside, pattering and smearing against the windscreen. He'd have to wait before his next fix.

His breath periodically fogged the inside of the windows until he blasted the heater in the Mercedes AMG in fits and starts. The air conditioning was on the blink and the car would get unbearably hot if he left the blowers on for too long. Besides, it kept his fingers busy, having to press buttons and turn dials every so often. He gnawed on his thumb nail, drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

What was taking her so long?

The last few visitors trickled out of the building. He was pulled up outside the Royal West of England Academy, one in a short row of cars were all leaving now the event was over. Soon he would be the only car there. Exposed. Obvious. He'd have to time this right so she didn't see his face.

A few more minutes and eventually she descended the wide oval steps outside.

"Who's that?" he said to himself. He reached for his camera on the front seat, zoomed in on the couple. Snapped a few images. Their body language was familiar but formal, colleagues who were fond of each other.

He'd never seen this guy before. Had he missed something? What was going on here?

He zoomed in on the guy. Tall, well dressed in a good suit. Dark blond hair, tanned complexion, as far as he could tell in the fading daylight. Good looking. Fit.

He clenched his teeth. This was the first time he'd seen her with another man. One her age anyway. One who could get in his way. His jaw started to ache.

"Shit," he hissed to himself.

Until that moment, he could imagine himself with her. There was a burning sensation in his stomach. He knew her routines, had always been there in the background somewhere. As good as being with her. He could protect her from a distance. Exert a certain level of control over who she associated with. An invisible guardian. An angel (a demon).

"So what's your story pretty boy?"

They were heading his way now. She'd hooked her arm through his. Seeing it made him feel sick.

He wanted a cigarette now. To settle his stomach and calm down.

She glanced up, checking for traffic and turned to look directly at the Mercedes. He flicked the lights on quickly, started the engine and slowly backed out. Innocent enough.

She looked the other way. Looked at her companion. They were talking, laughing as they walked.

He should probably follow them, but he didn't have the belly for it.

Who was the guy? He needed to know.

He turned out of the parking bay, filtered into the traffic and drove away.

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