

## CHAPTER 2

Chas's eyes tracked Danni as she came out of the bathroom. Her red pony tail bounced softly on the back of her black wetsuit and her feet slapped softly on the linoleum until she hit the worn carpet. She stopped and looked at him.

"What?" she asked, her eyes narrowed.

"Nothing," Chas replied. He shrugged his shoulders and shot a glance at the Pastor who diverted his eyes. Turning back to Danni he said, "Just looks a bit weird, that's all. You, walking around a church in a wetsuit." As he looked at her standing in her bare feet, easily six inches shorter and seventy pounds lighter than Chas, he hoped they didn't run into anything large in the well.

"Yeah, *feels* pretty damn weird too," she glanced at the pastor. "Sorry fath—ah, pastor." He grinned weakly. She turned back to Chas, "You ready to do this or what?"

Her voice and eyes told him she wasn't any too happy about the smell, making the dive, or standing around in a skin tight wetsuit in front of the pastor. "Yeah," he answered with fake enthusiasm. "Let's do it."

Danni stepped around the gear, their Buoyancy Compensators, BC's, which held their air tanks, weights and various tools and lights, and stopped next to the three black garbage bags draped over the rail. Chas saw her grimace at the sight of the bags. Knowing what she was thinking he stepped onto the platform, closed the gate behind him and edged her to the side so that he stood with the bags hidden behind him.

“Going down,” He shot a toothy grin at Danni, got a dark look in return, shrugged his shoulders and pushed the green down button on the control panel.

As the platform began a smooth descent he slid close to Danni. She turned away, pulled the regulator off the top of her tank and stuffed it in her mouth, then she cleared the mouthpiece blowing and sucking to check its operation and left it in. Chas listened to the heavy mechanical breathing next to him and shook his head. He knew the smell, whose strength increased as they descended, wasn't the only reason she had left it in.

It didn't look like she was going to warm to him soon, so he turned his attention to the walls of the well, frequently reaching out to touch the smooth artificial surface. He pondered the labor involved in bringing what must have been a brick or exposed rock surface to its current smooth finish. Chas wondered how long the church had been using the well as its centerpiece and what it was before. *Probably a simple farmer's well at one time*, he thought, *later shaped smooth for the church*.

“Don't you think it's odd that someone would build a church around an old well like this, Danni?”

She pulled the regulator out of her mouth and said, “No. What I think is odd is that I let you talk me into diving in this . . . this stink-hole.” She jammed the mouthpiece back in and continued her noisy breathing.

Chas went back to studying the walls, alternately checking the opening above and the surface below. He threw a wave at the pastor, unable to see if it was returned against the glare. As they continued their descent, the well shaft began to open up. Chas, no longer able to touch the walls, leaned over the rail and poked the beam of his dive light at

the water below. The glassy surface reflected the lights above making it impossible to tell how far the beam penetrated.

Nearly three minutes passed before the platform began to slow. Chas heard Danni suck two quick, nervous breaths through her mouthpiece as the platform glided to a smooth stop and the cool water welled up around them stopping just above his knees. The water temperature was the same as the constant 71 degrees in the caves they dove and, though refreshing on a hot summer day, now seemed much colder to him.

He grabbed Danni's BC as it floated toward the middle of the platform and held it up for her to push her arms through. She pulled out the mouthpiece, leaned over to support the tank weight, zipped up the front and popped the mouthpiece back in. Then she turned to help Chas. He shook his head, knelt down, pulled his BC over his back and stood up in a hunch, shifting the weight of the chrome tank until it felt comfortable. He stood for inspection as she pulled straps, twisted connections and double checked his pressure gauge and back-up regulator as he had done for her. They performed this ritual before each dive to insure they were ready and knew where to reach for an air supply on their partner's 'BC' in an emergency.

The platform, though damped by the water, swayed slightly as they moved toward the gate together making him wonder what it would be like with half a dozen nervous people milling around waiting to be dipped. He inched his way to the edge of the platform then reached for the rail and swung it open.

Chas stopped and turned to face Danni. Pulling his regulator out, he spoke in a whisper. "Danni, listen, this'll be a piece of cake." He glanced up quickly, hoping that the pastor couldn't hear him. "We head down, grab whatever is down there, bag it, bring it up

and tie it to the bottom of the platform. Then we float around and burn up some tank time so he'll feel like he got his money's worth. Ok?"

She gave him a wounded look and popped the regulator out of her mouth, "Chas, he's a priest. How can you even—"

"What? You want to do this for free just because he's a priest? Hey, churches are just big businesses," he justified. "And anyway, he's not a priest, just a country pastor."

Her eyes burned a bright green through her mask. They had been there before. He held up his hand to end the discussion, put his mouthpiece in, flipped his mask down and stepped backward off the platform into the wet darkness with a splash.

Danni watched as Chas turned his light on and the water came alive. His dive light, panning the area around the platform, reminded her of the light on a Mississippi River barge cutting through a thick fog. When she stepped to the edge of the platform and aimed her light on the water she saw the floating particles and greasy look of the surface. Her heart beat fast as she imagined his beam suddenly illuminating a decomposed body. Hesitating at the gate she saw nothing as he cast his light throughout the well and down.

She'd been cave diving for five years and never before had she approached a mere cavern with such trepidation. A shiver ran up her spine and she knew she had to get in now or never. Inching her way back to the edge of the platform, she looked over her shoulder at Chas disappearing into the depths, clamped her mouthpiece hard and dropped into the water with a grimace.

Disoriented at first by the dark liquid surrounding her, she became comfortable quickly even with the thought of what might be in the well and started down to meet

Chas. She found him floating twenty feet below in a legs crossed 'Yoga' position waiting for her. She drifted down next to him. He flashed a quick 'OK' signal and she returned it. *She was 'OK' – she just wanted this to be over.*

The well was still only thirty feet in diameter. Danni strained to see the bottom but couldn't make it out. She saw Chas point down then hold his air release valve up above his head letting out a few bubbles of air from his BC to decrease his buoyancy. With a wave he rolled over and started a slow descent. To stay oriented Danni swung her light back and forth between the walls and Chas's flashing fins as she followed him down. *He's moving at a reasonable pace, she thought, maybe for once he's going to take his time.* Then she remembered what he'd said about making the pastor feel like he got his money's worth. That still burned her.

After a few minutes Danni stopped, gripped her nose through the mask and did another valsalva purge to help equalize the pressure in her ears. She checked the dive computer on her left wrist and saw that it read 84 feet. So far she'd only seen minor changes in the walls of the well which remained the rough gray-brown porous limestone as full of holes large and small as she had seen in all the caves they dove throughout Florida.

She looked away from her computer and began a search of the walls with her light when she saw what looked like a shadow, a break in the shape of the well walls below. Chas saw it too and stopped to signal her that they were approaching bottom. She concentrated on slowing her breathing and tried to put the vision of a body hovering on the bottom out of her mind.

Swimming closer to the shadow it became clear to her that the irregular shape defined an opening, perhaps a tunnel or a cave below them, not the bottom. Chas stopped and waved his light, first in her face, then his. He pulled the mouthpiece from his face and flashed a big grin. She got the message. They had just been handed an opportunity few divers ever get; the opportunity to discover a whole new cave system. She nodded enthusiastically to him.

Chas powered toward the shadowy opening and Danni's heart beat fast with anticipation. For a moment, she forgot what it was they came down there for as she swam to keep up with Chas's powerful strokes. He slowed and then stopped. She drifted down beside him and the two studied the opening. It was a rough oval about five feet high and eight feet across, plenty wide for two divers, except for the jagged outcroppings across the top. They posed a large hazard to diving gear. Danni pointed to the bottom of the opening to suggest that they enter there. Chas nodded. Together they shined their lights into the cave. Danni felt her heart again begin to pound. Their bright beams together showed nothing but darkness ahead.

Danni checked her dive computer again and it read: 115 feet. Anticipating a short dive, they hadn't used their normal mixed gases and re-breathers. Danni studied her dive computer and determined they had another thirty minutes to explore the cave and surface. She flashed her light at Chas and tapped her computer screen. He checked his own and nodded. *At least he's paying attention to the time*, she thought.

Chas pulled his light back to his dive computer, checked it again, tapped it and held up his ten fingers. She nodded. They had ten minutes to explore the cave. That

gave them approximately one third of their calculated time inside the cave and two thirds to get back out—the standard formula for a safe cave dive. They headed into the cave.

Chas's heart and ears pounded with excitement. As they continued into the cave a blue-green glow reflected off the walls and around them in a scene reminiscent of Martian caves he imagined as a child reading science fiction. He felt the pressure of a slow descent in his ears as they followed cave floor. Though wide openings occasionally appeared on each side of them, they were only a couple feet high, too small for a fully geared diver to enter. Pockmarked rock with edges sharp as serpentine wire formed the walls. Portions of fallen ceiling littered the floor in boulders on top of a layer of fine silt and sand. He was careful to maintain a safe distance from the bottom, using short quick strokes of his fins to propel himself slowly along with the weak current that pushed them further into the cave. He didn't want to stir up the silt and fog their visibility.

Chas savored the view as his light cut through the darkness with its blue-green hue. Pumping adrenaline at a rate that he hadn't felt since his first cave dive six years ago, he tried to slow his breathing and heart rate to conserve his air supply. He stopped a moment and let Danni swim up beside him. When she stopped, he pointed to his watch. The countdown timer now read seven minutes-twelve seconds.

He grinned again at Danni and she pointed at her nose and then up. He knew what she was saying: "Do the job first, explore later." He nodded to her and turned back into the cave. As far as he was concerned they were doing just that. Since they hadn't found anything in the well, the problem had to be in this cave.

Within minutes they came to a bend in the cave. Taking the turn, Chas found himself swimming closer to Danni to avoid bumping into the side of the tunnel. The further they went into the cave the closer it got and finally Chas took the lead with two powerful kicks. He kept up the pace, hoping to cover as much ground as possible in the limited time they had.

Danni fell behind as Chas passed across an opening in the cave to his right without stopping. She approached the opening with her eyes on Chas's fins as he powered ahead with seemingly effortless strokes. She saw it coming up, but assumed that Chas had not considered it worth investigating. She was nearly past the opening when she caught something in her peripheral vision. She stopped, turned and aimed the dive light.

Chas started a turn to spot Danni when he heard a frightening sound, a sound he'd heard before when an inexperienced diver blew out a large burst of air in a panicked scream. He spun around fearing the worst. Danni was not the type to panic.

A cloud of silt hovered where she should have been, illuminated by the faint glare of her dive light, unmoving and aimed in his direction. His heart rate and breathing succumbed to the rush of adrenaline, both racing as he powered back toward her.

Panicked fin strokes stirred the silt from the bottom leaving a dark cloud behind him to match the one in front. He was sandwiched in a fog of particles that reflected off his dive light, decreasing the visibility to mere feet. With Danni's dive light shining in his face and the silt cloud fast approaching, Chas feared he would collide with her but dared not slow. Visions of Danni pinned under fallen rock filled his mind and he pumped harder.