

THE SLEEP OF CENTURIES IS ENDED—THE  
TIME OF MYSTERY AND MAGIC HAS BEGUN

# MONTEZUMA'S PEARL



VID LEE JONES

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江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章

DAVID LEE

JONES



AVON BOOKS • NEW YORK

## Acknowledgments

Having shifted gears again and gone off-road into this new story, there are new people to thank for their contributions, whether they know it or not.

First, as always, my wife, Paula, for taking care of me, the house, our daughter Rosemary, and a million other things. In case you're wondering, I take care of the yard, a couple of dozen houseplants, various bills, our two Chevys, the garage (currently filled to overflowing with home improvement supplies), and our Labrador, Daisy. I also pick our daughter up from preschool every day.

Paul and Barbara Gregoire, my in-laws, for treating me like a son, showing us Baja on a budget, and planting the seed of this story in my head.

Michael Larsen and Elizabeth Pomada, my agents, for believing in these wild stories.

Chris Miller, my editor at Avon, for her usual expert editing and story advice.

Frank Dorland, master crystallographer, who spent six years studying the life-sized Miller-Hedges crystal skull found in Latin America in the 1920s, upon which this story is based. There are three known life-sized pure rock crystal skulls in existence, all believed to be Aztec in origin. This tale is about the fourth, as yet undiscovered.

One who looks  
Into the Eyes of God  
When the shadow  
Sleeps  
Receives the power  
of the Sun

... Aztec Legend

Fame is an anxious trumpeter  
Astride a winged steed,  
Hastily announcing one's arrival  
And departure  
In the same shallow note

... author

# Introduction

## *Treasure*

Every treasure carries a promise and a curse. The promise is always great wealth, worldly or spiritual, the curse invariably ruin or death. Knowing this great truth and little else, we are ill-prepared for the battle that wages within us upon discovering hidden treasure. We find the lure of fantastic wealth intoxicating, completely irresistible, and are drawn helplessly into its magnetic field. Unable to walk away, we must follow fate to the very center of the battlefield.

What strange and powerful forces are at work in this world and beyond to keep treasures buried for so long at the bottom of the brooding, quiet ocean? What makes the sea change its mind after centuries of silence and spill forth its secrets? Perhaps time itself, the keeper of all secrets, is finally ready to reveal its bounty, to cast its powerful, magic spell.

Sunken treasure often lies in shallow water, just below the surface, waiting to be discovered. Sometimes it only takes a shift in the tides, or a footprint on the ocean floor, to expose the cache of kings. The sleep of centuries can be guarded by only a thin watery sheet. And sometimes, in a rare bold moment, the sheet slowly slips away, and treasures that hold the secrets of the universe are revealed. When that happens, there is no escape, no putting the bounty back. Whatever curse or good fortune awaits the finder must be endured, regardless of cost.

Such is the story of Montezuma's Pearl.



## Discovery

*Mexico: Present Day*

As my wet, bare foot touched the hard, curved ridge, I instinctively pulled back. But it was already too late. The sleep of centuries had ended. The adventure had begun.

Just inches below the surface lay the treasure that would change my life forever. It stared up at me as calmly and quietly as the morning paper, yet little did I know that it commanded worlds. It was barely visible on the dark, sandy bottom, and I should have just turned quietly and innocently away. But that was impossible. My eyes were transfixed like Adam staring at the apple. I stood motionless for a moment in the midday sun, baking on that nearly deserted beach in a tiny fishing village on the Gulf of California.

The sea was my alluring Eve, offering up the fruit of knowledge. Something inside me said I must take it. Perhaps it was just natural curiosity, or the lure of sunken treasure that sent me back to camp to fetch my shovel, or perhaps fate itself was fulfilling a promise made centuries and cultures ago.

I stared down at the hard-edged object beneath six inches of water, knowing I'd have to act fast. The tide was coming in quickly and would soon be up to my waist. By the time the tide went out again, my find could be buried forever in sand. Of course, it could have been only the ridge of a rock. There were plenty of those along the wide, flat shore, but it had the feel under my foot of a shell: the biggest one I had ever encountered.

I dropped to my knees, reached under the water, and ran my hand cautiously over its bony surface. There were two curved ridges exposed in the sand, each about a foot long

and parallel to each other, like the matching flutes of a giant clam.

This far north on the gulf the tide went out a half mile, and I was a full quarter mile from camp. The situation didn't look good.

Making a valiant but vain attempt, I sloshed and ran back to grab the small camp shovel leaning against the Winnebago, counting my strides and sighting a line so I wouldn't lose the spot where the shell lay buried.

Just my luck to be alone, I thought. My wife and our two-year-old had gone the ten miles into town, and had taken the jeep. Maggie, our five-year-old yellow Labrador, went along for protection.

Shovel in hand, I charged over to the half-finished stucco shack the campground owner called home. But Mr. Zapata had gone off to check on his goat herd or something. I was alone, and the tide was coming in fast.

Tossing the shovel aside, I rummaged around under the motor home and came up with a hammer and a tent pole, then dashed back down the little sandbank to the water.

By the time I squished my way back through the thick, dark sand and sloshed through the rising tide, it was already too late. The shell had disappeared under two feet of water. I stood dejectedly over the spot where the ridge should have been. Was I even looking in the right place? Had I miscounted my steps? Was it ten yards to the left? Maybe it was a little farther out? I couldn't tell.

With the water lapping at my knees, I picked a spot and drove the tent pole into the sand, knowing the shell had to be nearby. Driving the pole down to three feet, I turned and left, wading back to shore, catching my breath, and getting thirsty for a beer.

Back at the campsite I opened the cooler and pulled out a bottle of Corona. I sat in a lawn chair with my feet resting on the foot-high rock wall that separated the hard, flat campground from the beach sand, which sloped twenty yards down to the water. In an hour the tide would be almost lapping the wall.

I thought about being alone. There was the wonderful peace of solitude, but what I really needed was someone to

share my find. Even if we couldn't have done anything more than mark the spot as I had done, at least I would have had *someone to share in the excitement*. Sure, it was probably just a worthless shell fragment half-buried in the sand, but then again . . .

I finished the Corona, ignored the ten pounds that had settled in my stomach from the laziness of having a desk job back in LA, and grabbed another beer. This wasn't the stomach of the six-foot, 180-pound state wrestling champ of my high school days. That was seventeen years and many dreams ago. Back then I had two career choices, steroids or anonymity. The steroids could have gotten me on the cartoonish wrestling circuit, but I also wanted to live past fifty. So I wrestled a little in college, and got a degree in business instead. But I was not in the mood for too much of life's regrets that afternoon. There was some serious daydreaming to be done.

Popping the top, I laughed at the irony of the situation. The ice in the cooler had all turned to water, and the last dozen bottles of what started out as a case the week before floated and clinked together like glass buoys in a miniature ocean.

It was the beer that sent Ellen to town. She was to get ice and do a little tourist shopping. Sure, the fridge in her parents' Winnebago worked, but it was still stuffed with food, even after a week. She always brought enough to survive a month after a nuclear disaster.

The case of Corona for eight bucks was irresistible, and essential for relaxing in the warm sun of late October. Fortunately, the drinking hadn't ever gotten quite bad enough to cost me the marriage. I couldn't afford to lose Ellen, or Susie, our miracle baby.

Two beers later, with the tide mostly in, and sun above the palm frond umbrella, I imagined unearthing a whole giant clam, prying open its huge, thick jaws, and pulling out a satiny pearl the size, weight, and perfect shape of an undrilled bowling ball. I saw myself paying off the house, quitting my job as contracts administrator at the defense plant, and opening Hansen's Hardware—a mom-and-pop place with our dog on the porch, a Coke machine, and maybe even a gas pump



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## Sacrifice

"Home again. Home again," I said as my two-year-old ran to me from the jeep, repeating one of her favorite nursery rhymes. Susie was twenty-five pounds of blond hair, blue eyes, and wonder in a pink T-shirt, diaper, and lots of sunscreen.

"No, Daddy," she frowned and pointed her finger at me. "*This* is not home. We live on Wa nut Pace."

"That's right," I said excitedly, pulling her up into my arms. "We do live on Walnut Place. What'd you and Mommy buy in town?"

"Mommy . . . Mommy got ice. They didn't have any woons."

"No balloons? Well, we'll get one back in the States."

"Daddy?" she said as I put her down.

"What, sweetheart?"

"I have a poop."

"Yes." I wrinkled my nose. "So I smell. Let's get you changed."

I reached for her hand and took it in mine. Off we went to the motor home for a diaper. Afterward she climbed down the steps and marched over to Ellen.

"Mommy, Mommy. Daddy smells funny."

"I know," Ellen said with a frown. "He's been drinking again."

As I came down the steps, Susie turned to me and pointed. "Daddy, *you've* been drinking again."

"I know, sweetie." I turned and glared at Ellen. She was sitting in a lawn chair under the palm leaf umbrella, still wearing her electric green one-piece swimsuit, and a gold cross and necklace. "What's for lunch?"

She put her long slender legs on the edge of the card table, pushing a box of camping stuff aside with her feet. She brushed a strand of her short blond hair from her face, rubbed the ridge of her small freckled nose, checked her nails, and started in on me.

"Well," she said sarcastically, "you're probably not hungry now anyway. How many *cervezas* did you have?"

"Only two," I defended, looking at the waves lapping the shore, higher with every motion. "You shouldn't have been gone so long."

"I swear, Jack," Ellen scoffed, "I can't leave you alone for an hour . . . Look," she added, watching me sit on the rock wall with my back to her, "I know you're on vacation, and not driving anywhere, but . . ." She walked over and put her arms around me. "I just want you to eat something if I cook it."

Our Labrador had gotten jealous and dashed over to me for some petting. I stroked Maggie's short, yellow coat. Her tongue fell out of her mouth in warm satisfaction. Susie joined me on the wall, mimicking my pose of looking out to sea.

"You see how she copies you," Ellen said, not mad, but firmly in my ear. "You don't want her . . ."

"El," I interrupted, "I'll throw all the beer in the trash if it'll make you happy. I just can't talk about this anymore. Not since . . . Look, I'm burned out on the subject. I *know* it's a disease, all right? I know what happened to Dad. I'll throw all of it out right now if you want."

"Not if you're going to buy another case tomorrow. It's got to be a clean break, once and for all."

I grabbed her hands around my neck. "Cheeseburgers," I ordered. "Potato chips and all."

"Cheez burgers!" screamed Susie. "With Sesame Street buns."

"With sesame seed buns," I agreed, kissing Ellen's slender wrists. "I'll get the soda."

"I don't like soda," Susie said, frowning. "I want juice."

"Apple," I answered, tossing a sandy tennis ball for Maggie. She tore after it as if it was treasure. Ellen got up without saying a word and headed for the Winnebago. I didn't have to turn around. I could feel her smile.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Susie shouted, running after her. "I want . . . I want to get the Sesame Street buns. Wait, Mommy! I want to help!"

I got up and walked to the cooler on the other side of the motor home. With great determination, I grabbed all the beer bottles and set them on the wall. Feeling like an ancient Aztec priest making a blood sacrifice, I carefully popped the top off of one and ritualistically held it up to the sun overhead.

Then, in grand fashion, I slowly turned the bottle over and offered the precious liquid to the Earth. When I finished emptying all of the Coronas into the sand, I stuffed the bottles in their cardboard box to be returned for deposit.

I felt good, proud of my little gesture. I would try it once again—go dry. It would be sparkling water and soda the rest of the week. Heck, they even had Diet Pepsi in town now. It wouldn't be easy, but I made a decision then and there to try harder to hold on to the family, before I blew it once and for all. Letting Ellen go would've been tough. Susie would have been impossible. Shoot, I didn't even want to give up Maggie.

Scooting the case of empties under the motor home, I could hear Susie say from inside, "Mommy, Daddy poured out the beer. He won't smell funny anymore."

"I know," Ellen said. "Daddy only smells funny when he drinks. Let's just hope . . ." I heard the fridge open. "Here, Susie. Go take Daddy a soda."

"Okay," Susie answered. "*I'll take Daddy a soda.*"

When Susie got to me she shoved the Diet Slice my way. "Hee er, Daddy, drink this. *You* won't smell funny anymore."

I picked her up, smoothed her short, fine hair, and kissed her cheek. Setting her down, I whispered in her ear. "Okay, sweetheart. Tell Mommy I have a secret. Tell her Daddy found something in the ocean today. Tell her I think it's buried treasure. Can you remember that?"

"Yes. You found something in . . . in the ocean."

"And what was it?"

"*Bear reed trez were.*"

"Good girl." I beamed with pride at her grasp of the language. She turned away when I tried to kiss her again. I grabbed my toothbrush from the glass on the card table and walked to the shower at the far end of the campground. Susie was climbing the motor home steps, repeating *Bear reed trez were* to herself.

The ocean was still climbing up the beach, pushing my find farther underwater, and putting my daydreams to an end, while an unexpected afternoon was about to begin.



## Shell Game

Over burgers and buns, sodas and chips, we talked of family, vacations, and such. Ellen never mentioned what Susie must have told her. I was sure she got the message. As good as we had gotten at understanding two-year-old talk, there was no question of interpretation. That only left the likelihood of Ellen's style in such matters.

She loved to underplay this sort of thing. Got it from her

dad, the actuary, and her mom, the IRS agent. The family approach had always been black suit mortuary to all questionable reports of instant wealth. Money was made only through long protracted efforts, preferably behind a desk. Instant wealth, such as winning the lottery or wild stock speculation, was to be avoided at all costs. The Protestant work ethic was alive and prospered in her family, especially since the eighties had come and gone with the stain of shame on the stock market. So the source of Ellen's demeanor in such matters was well established. Attitude may not be inherited, but it can certainly be learned.

My dad, in direct contrast, had been a jazz trumpeter before his liver gave out from the booze. His avant-garde style reminded me of Miles Davis—brilliant, but barely understandable for the pop music set. Doc Hansen's style was considered by the experts to be expressive, sometimes to the point of excess.

I barely knew my mom. Lung cancer took her when I was four. Dad raised me alone after that, and never got over Mom's death. The cigarettes took her; the bottle took him.

As a physical kid, I took up wrestling to deal with my family problems in some outward way. I was even a bouncer at the club where my dad played in LA before my pursuit of a business degree at Cal State. College was where I met Ellen.

Six years into the marriage brought us to Baja for our annual family vacation, this time without her parents. Her dad was recovering from prostate surgery that October.

"Daddy found *bear reed trez were*," Susie said over brownies for dessert.

"I know," Ellen answered, nonplussed, then turned to me across the table inside the Winnebago. "So, what's this *buried treasure* you've been telling her about?"

"Oh," I shrugged. "It's probably nothing, really. Just some big shell in the sand out there."

Her expression changed. She stopped chewing and swallowed her brownie, then chased it with her usual glass of nonfat milk.

"How far out and how big?" she asked.

"Quarter mile. That's my guess. Straight out. It looked

like the ridge of one of those giant clams you see in B movies about sunken treasure. I could only see the top. It was underwater and the tide was coming in."

"So," she added nonchalantly, cleaning brownie off Susie's face. "You going to be able to find it again?"

"Sure, I marked the spot with a tent pole."

"Tent pole? Great. Now we'll probably have to buy my parents another one."

"Sea's not that rough right now. It'll still be there this afternoon."

She got up and took the dishes to the sink.

"This ... shell," she said coolly. "Was it open or closed?"

"Closed, tighter than an actuary's books." I turned in my seat and looked at her over my shoulder. "Ellen, it's big. I know it. And it's got something inside it. I can feel it."

"Who made you psychic of the week?"

"Okay, so I don't feel it. So what? Even if it's empty, it'll still make a great shell for our collection."

"If it's not all broken up. Look, when you buried the tent pole, are you sure you didn't drive it into the shell and break it?"

"I don't know. It was under two feet of water by then."

Ellen shut off the faucet and put her hands on her hips. "Was this before or after the *cervezas*?"

"Ellen, that's not fair and you know it. But if you must know, I was sober at the time."

"The tide will be out this afternoon," she said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "We can go look then."

"Yeah, I just hope it's where I marked it."

"Yeah," she mimicked me, "I just hope the tent pole's there."



## Invisible Touch

The afternoon was heavy with waiting and hot wind. We spent a lot of time slow-tanning beneath layers of sunscreen before an onshore breeze pummeled us with heat and sand. We took to the water to cool off and clean the sand off the sticky parts of our bodies.

When it came to sun protection, I never needed as much as Ellen or Susie—the fair-skinned set. I already had a little bit of olive tint to my skin. They were white as washing machines. My hair was bushy and black, as were my eyebrows, chest, and mustache, though a few strands on my chest were beginning to show the transformation to gray. My high school yearbook said I had the rugged good looks of an outdoorsman crossed with a soap opera star—whatever that meant.

Ellen and I had met on the track at Cal State, where my wrestling scholarship got me in, despite mediocre grades. I had been doing laps as part of my workout when I was passed by a serious set of legs attached to a good-looking coed. I took off after her like she had stolen my wallet. It shocked me when she beat me to the finish line. When she finally slowed down I grabbed her arm to congratulate her. Still catching my breath, I asked where she learned to run like that.

“I thought you were chasing me,” she said, exhaling, and we laughed about it.

We started out together running on that track. And though we may not have been Olympic running material, we both had athletic scholarships that got us through college, and we ended up walking down the aisle together.

Ten years later Susie came into our lives, just when we had almost given up on having children of our own. I didn’t think much about it when Ellen got some fertility pills from

the doctor, but I'll never forget that morning she came to the table with mist in her eyes. When she said she was pregnant, I cried for ten minutes. We were finally getting our turn at parenting. That was three and a half years and a lifetime ago.

Later that afternoon in Baja we filled the hole of anticipation with bouts of swimming. That was before the stings started.

We were splashing about and tossing in the waves close to shore when the water grew suddenly warm and green. A strange current had drifted in from somewhere. To the east storm clouds gathered across the gulf, while we enjoyed the rush of warm water.

Maggie had been paddling next to me and suddenly yelped. A minute later Ellen and Susie had both screamed and scrambled to shore. ♡

By the time Maggie and I joined them, Ellen had a line of pink welts on her arm that looked like instant poison oak. Susie's were on her leg. Maggie had the same thing on her hairless belly. Something was out there.

Ellen carried Susie to the motor home for some lotion while I stayed at the shore, studying the water. Visibility was pretty good for about ten feet, but the wind was getting stronger and stirring up the bottom. Maggie began to bark.

I kept waiting for the theme from *Jaws* to start playing, but there was only the rushing wind and crashing waves. They broke up into whitecaps, smashing hard on the rocks and shells that lay strewn along the shore.

Scouring the water for my foe proved futile, so I turned to leave. The wind picked up harder, flinging the clothes off the makeshift clothesline we had erected between the Cristo-sized palm leaf umbrellas that marked the campsites.

Halfway up the slope I turned and called to Maggie. She wouldn't leave the beach. She stood her ground along the waterline and barked at the ocean. Slowly, I made my way down the gentle slope to the spot where she planted herself. The barking didn't stop until I reached her side. Searching the water again revealed nothing. It was choppiest than ever, breaking wildly on the sand and lashing at my feet.

I grabbed Maggie's chain collar and got ready to drag her away, but she still wouldn't budge. "Come on, girl," I or-



dered, pulling at her chain. "It's only the ocean. Whatever was out there is gone. Let's go."

She refused to move, and began to whine. I reached down and picked her up—eighty pounds and all—and started up the bank. That was when she growled at me. She never did that, even when I took chicken bones away from her. Then she did the impossible: she nipped my arm.

It startled me so much that I dropped her. She ran back to her spot. I gave the ocean one last look, rubbing my arm and following Maggie's intense stare into the surf.

Ten feet offshore, in a patch of warm, green water, floated what looked like a transparent baseball threaded with a thin line of purple. It pushed part of itself out the back, pulled it in, and pulsated forward, towing foot-long purple strands behind it.

I ran to the motor home and checked on Ellen and Susie. They were fine, considering the welts. The pink lines of blisters had turned darker, but weren't getting worse. Susie was a trouper, barely complaining. Ellen never said a word.

Quickly describing what was in the ocean, I grabbed a blue plastic bucket and dashed back to the shore. Maggie had moved down the beach, following the course of the intruder.

I waded into the water, dodged a couple of waves, and with a quick motion scooped my prey into the bucket, then carried it back up the hill. This time Maggie came with me.

Setting the bucket in the sun, I studied the little sea monster and then climbed into the motor home. Ellen was gently rubbing another layer of ointment on Susie's leg. I motioned for them to come.

Once outside, Ellen held Susie in her arms and looked down. "What is it?" she asked.

"That," I said, watching it pulsate against the side of the bucket, "is a jellyfish."

"*Yellyfish*," Susie repeated. "I want down. I want to see it."

Ellen set Susie down, warning her not to put her hands in the water, then looked at me. I stared at the eight-inch welt on her arm.

"I didn't know they had jellyfish in these waters," she said.