



POINT BLANK

· A N F B I T H R I L L E R

CATHERINE COULTER

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To Anton

*We've got a winner here. Thank you for being who
and what you are, and thank you for being mine.*

POINT BLANK



CHAPTER 1

WINKEL'S CAVE

MAESTRO, VIRGINIA

FRIDAY AFTERNOON

RUTH WARNECKI PAUSED to consult her map, even though she'd read it so many times it was worn and stained from use, with a smear of strawberry jam on one corner. Okay, she'd walked and crawled down this twisting passage exactly the 46.2 feet indicated on the map. She'd measured it carefully, just as she'd measured all the distances since she climbed down into that first offshoot passage at the end of the cavern's entrance. A narrow and twisty passage, smelling strongly of bat guano, some lengths of it so low she'd had to crab-walk, it had finally flattened out. So far the distances had matched those on her map to the centimeter.

At this point, there should have been a small arched opening directly to her right. She focused her head lamp some eight feet up to the top of the cave wall then slowly scanned downward. She didn't see an arch or any sign that there'd ever been one. She went over the directions again to this point, rechecked the distances, but no, she hadn't screwed that up. Again, she shone her head lamp on the cave wall, moved back and forth at least three feet in both directions. Nothing. She was in the right spot, she knew it.

Ruth rarely cursed when she was frustrated. She hummed instead. And so she hummed as she began to glide the palms of her hands slowly over the wall, pushing inward here and there. The wall was limestone, dry to the touch, eons of sand filming over it. Nothing but a solid cave wall.

She was disappointed, but she knew that was a fact of life for a treasure hunter. Her old uncle, Tobin Jones, a treasure hunter for fifty years, and something of a mentor to her, had told her that for every authentic treasure map, there are more fraudulent ones than illegal aliens in California. Of course that was because every fraudulent map was a treasure in itself if it sucked in the right mark. Problem is, Tobin had said with a shake of his head, we're all suckers. But that, he'd always believed, was better than those idiots traipsing over an empty ballpark or a beach with their metal detectors, looking for nickels.

Actually, she used metal detectors, had a portable one attached to her belt along with two more flashlights. Yes, she understood all about fake treasure maps, but she'd really been excited about this one. All her research had led her to believe it could be the real

deal. Even the age of the paper, the ink, and the manner of writing tested out—about 150 years old.

But there was no arch. She felt the crash of disappointment again and kicked the cave wall. There was always frustration, and it wasn't as if she hadn't been taken before. There were the two fraudulent maps that had sent her after the guys who'd sold them to her; they'd known she was a cop, the morons. Then there was the Scotsman who sold her a map of a cave not a quarter of a mile west of Loch Ness. She should have known better, but he was so charming she believed him for one delicious moment.

She shook her head. *Pay attention.* This map wasn't a fraud, she felt it in her gut. If there was gold here, she intended to find it. If there wasn't an arch, maybe it had crumbled and filled in over the long years.

Yeah, right. She laughed at herself, an odd, creepy sound in the dense silence. *What an idiot.* The arch certainly could have collapsed, but it would remain visible. Debris from a cave-in would remain *in situ* for longer than time itself. Nothing would magically occur to fill it in from bottom to top so seamlessly.

Only men could do that.

She stepped back, lifted her head so her head lamp shone directly on the wall. She studied every inch of it, pressing inward with her fist everywhere she could reach. Mr. Weaver had told her this part of Winkel's Cave had never been explored, much less mapped. Even though he appeared worried for her, he still had a gleam in his eye at the thought of splitting any treasure she found.

It was the feel of the cave, she thought, the way the silence felt, the hollow sound of her footsteps. She was sure no one had been

in this cave for a very long time, perhaps since the gold was left here. Mr. Weaver had installed an iron grate to close off the entrance—fools injuring themselves, suing him, he'd told her. He couldn't find the key, but that hadn't mattered. The lock had been child's play to pick.

Finally, she stepped back and hummed some more. If someone had filled in an arched opening, they did it remarkably well. She could find no seams, nothing that looked out of place or staged. She sat back against the opposite cave wall and retied one of her walking boots. She realized she was tired. She pulled out an energy bar, her favorite peanut butter, and slowly began to eat it, washing it down with water from the plastic bottle fastened to her belt. Still sitting, she raised her head to train her lamp again on the opposite wall. She was beginning to hate that frigging wall. She began at the top, and slowly scanned all the way to the bottom again.

She saw something, about two feet above the floor, where the light reflected differently. She crawled to the wall and studied the thin shadow she'd seen. There, that was it, a line of dust and dirt about a half an inch wide.

Ohmigod, it wasn't just a line; it was shaped like an arch.

She felt her adrenaline spike. She looked more closely and saw that someone had gouged the arch deeply into the wall. She touched it with her fingertip, lightly pushed inward. Her finger sank easily through years of soft, thick dust, up to her first knuckle. She knew one thing for sure now. The accumulation of dust in that grooved arch was decades older than she was. She wondered how many more years would have to pass before the

arch outline disappeared entirely. Who had cut this arch and why, for heaven's sake? Or was it a cover of some kind?

Ruth lightly pushed against the limestone directly below the top of the arch. To her astonishment, it gave a little. She laid her palm flat against the wall and gave a sharp push. The stone fell back some more. Her heart kettledrummed in her chest. The stone was light enough that she could dig it out. She pulled the small pick from her belt and went at it; the limestone crumbled, and suddenly she was staring at a small round hole.

She leaned forward, but the hole was too small for her to see anything in the chamber beyond. And there *was* a chamber beyond, the chamber she was looking for. Grinning like a madwoman, Ruth continued to use the pick on the limestone below the line of the arch. The stone broke apart, collapsing inward into the next chamber. When she'd cleared it out, it was no bigger than a St. Bernard doggie door, but it was large enough to look into. Shoving dirt out of the way, she stuck her head through the opening. She saw nothing but a floor. Pulling her second flashlight out of her belt she beamed both it and her head lamp straight ahead, then slowly to the right, then back to the left. The light faded into endless black, without reflection.

She pulled back and sat on her heels. The men who'd hidden the gold had cut this slab of limestone out of another part of the cave and fitted it in this space, to better hide the low entrance to the treasure chamber. She was so excited her fingertips were dancing: she was nearly there. She stuck her arm through the opening, felt nothing but the smooth dirt floor, solid and dry, the chamber the map showed beyond the archway. Everything was as

it should be. So the precious map hidden in the age-dampened cardboard box of nineteenth-century books she'd bought off that old man in Manassas wasn't created two weeks ago in a back room in Newark and planted there. *Let's do it, Ruth.* It was a tight squeeze, but once she got her shoulders through, the rest was easy.

She swung her legs in front of her, raised her flashlight, and beamed it together with her head lamp around the space. According to the map, the chamber was good-sized, some thirty feet across and forty feet wide. She didn't see the opposite wall, she didn't see anything.

She pulled out her compass. Yes, the opposite wall had to be due east. Everything was where it should be. She realized in that moment that the air wasn't stale or dank, which one would expect in a cave chamber sealed for 150 years. She sucked in air that was fresher than the air in the main passage. Now wasn't that a kick—she had to be close to an unmapped exit, and wouldn't that have been handy for the men who hid the gold? Slowly she got to her feet and looked straight ahead. It was like standing in a dark pit, but she'd done that before, and with a head lamp you'd see the boundaries, wouldn't you? She sucked in more of the wonderful fresh air. There was an underlying scent, something rather sweet that she couldn't quite identify. For a moment she felt disoriented. She paused, and continued to breathe slowly and deeply, waiting for her head to clear, for the world to right itself. She felt a sort of dull heaviness in her arms and legs but then it was gone and her head seemed clear again. Time to move. She took a step forward, carefully planting her foot on the solid earth. What had she expected? To step off into space? She laughed aloud, to prove

she could. Her own voice sounded fresh and alive, clear as Mrs. Monroe's when she called to Woodrow to finish his business and come in. What a strange thought that was.

She felt something familiar niggle at the back of her brain—excitement mixed with fear, she thought, and smiled. Oh boy, was she pumped, even a little dizzy with it. But not stupid. She had no intention of gaily striding forward and stepping into a pit right before the finish line. She had to be smart, like Indiana Jones. She had to feel for trip wires and booby traps. Now that was a weird thought. She felt a shot of dizziness that made her stumble. She eased down to her knees, laid her flashlight on the ground in front of her, and began to slide her palms along the floor. The floor, thank God, continued smooth and sandy, though it seemed to shimmy a bit when she got up close. There weren't any gnarled old vines tied across the chamber to unleash poison-tipped blow darts or to fire old rifles that surely wouldn't work anymore. She heard nothing but the sound of her own breathing. Truth was, she was so excited it was hard to keep herself crawling and not do a mad sprint to the short passageway just beyond the chamber. The gold was there, in a small alcove, waiting for her, untouched since those bone-weary soldiers had hauled it in and drawn the map so they could return for it. Only no one had.

She continued to ease forward on her hands and knees. Every little while, she moved the flashlight out ahead of her again. It seemed like she had crawled for a long time.

Too long a time.

She suddenly felt disoriented, again felt that strange heaviness in her arms and legs. She stopped, brought the flashlight up, and

looked at the map. She could hardly read it and wondered why. She knew it said thirty feet to the opposite wall, she knew that, but for some reason she couldn't get her brain around the idea. Surely she'd crawled thirty feet. It seemed like she'd crawled forever. Well, all right, maybe she'd crawled for a good three minutes. She looked at her watch. Thirteen minutes past two in the afternoon. She looked at the map yet again, tangible, as real as she was, her guide to the underworld, her guide to the River Styx. She laughed, a harsh, ugly sound. Where had that come from? She tried to concentrate. She was in a cave chamber, nothing more, nothing less. She had to be near the opposite wall, had to be. Then she'd take those three long steps to the right and there would be a small passageway—it was a passageway, wasn't it?—and it led . . .

She heard something.

Ruth froze. From the moment she'd finessed the pathetic lock and begun her trek into the cave, there'd been only the noise made by bats and the sound of her own voice, of her own breathing. But now she held her breath. Her mouth was suddenly as dry as the sandy floor beneath her boots. She strained to listen.

There was only silence, as absolute as the blackness.

All right, she'd take silence. Silence was good. She was alone, no monsters hanging around at the edge of her light. She was freaking herself out for no reason, she, who took pride in her control. But why couldn't she see any cave walls?

She knew the rough distance of a foot, not much longer than her own foot, and started counting. When she reached about fourteen feet, she stopped, stretched out her hand as far as she could, and her flashlight and head lamp cut a huge swath farther ahead

of her. No wall. All right, so her distances were off. No problem, no reason to panic.

But she'd heard something—for an instant. What was the noise she heard?

She kept counting and crawling forward. At least another twenty feet. Okay, this was ridiculous. Where was the opposite wall?

She rose to her feet, shone her head lamp and flashlight together in a circle around her. She pulled out her compass again and pointed it. She stared at the needle. West. No, that couldn't be right. She wasn't facing west, she was facing east, the direction of the opposite wall. But there was no sign of a wall in any direction. She shook the compass. It still read west. It couldn't be functioning properly.

She stuffed it back in her pocket and pulled her hefty twenty-five-foot measuring tape off her belt. She slowly fed out the metal strip in a line directly in front of her, into the blackness. Finally she reached the end of the tape. There was no wall.

She felt fear, raw and paralyzing, crawl right up her throat. Why was she feeling this way? She was a cop, for heaven's sake, she'd been in much tougher spots than this. She prided herself on her focus, on her ability to keep panic at bay, on her common sense. Nothing could shake her, her mother had always said, and it wasn't necessarily a compliment.

But she was shaken now.

Get back on track, Ruth, get back on track, that's what Savich would say.

All right, bottom line: The chamber was bigger than the

damned map said it was. Another effort at misdirection, like the arched doggie door covered with a slab of limestone. So what? No big deal. She'd go back out of the chamber and think things over. How many feet had she come? A good long ways. She turned and fed out the measuring tape back toward the archway. Naturally, she couldn't see the arched opening beyond the dissipated circle of light from her head lamp. She crawled on the tape to make sure she kept in a straight line. When she reached the end of it, she fed out a second twenty-five feet. Nothing. Then another twenty-five feet. She shone her head lamp together with her flashlight all around her. Nothing at all. She looked at her compass. It said she was moving northeast. No, that was absurd. She was heading due west, right back toward the opening.

She looked up again, realized that her flashlight had faded away into a ghostly beam. All right, she'd walked a mile, who cared? And the compass was all screwed up. She didn't need it to make her think she was crazy. She stuck it in her pocket, picked up the tape and fed it out another twenty-five feet, sure she'd see the archway at any moment. She'd come a hundred feet. At any moment, the tape would slither right through the opening back into the corridor. She crawled more slowly. By the time she'd crawled the full twenty-five feet, she was shaking.

Stop it, stop it. She pressed the retract button and heard the hiss of the tape as it smoothly ran back in. She stood there, holding the tape, knowing she was afraid to feed it out again. What was the point?

No, no, that was stupid. She had to. She had no choice. She fed out the tape again, smoothly and quickly. But even as she worked

it out to its maximum twenty-five feet, she knew in her gut it wouldn't touch anything. Still, she crawled the distance, then stopped, looked. She was nowhere, surrounded by black; she was being pressed in by black. *No, no, stop it.*

She knew she'd crawled in a straight line, but it was obvious now that she hadn't; it was the only explanation. She'd veered off to the left or right. But still, shouldn't the tape measure hit a wall? *Of course it should, but you're not near a wall, are you? You're not near anything at all.*

Ruth began to move in a circle, keeping the measuring tape fully extended. No wall, nothing.

She was losing it, her brain was twisted up, gone squirrely. At a wave of dizziness and nausea, she sat on the floor, barely breathing now. She felt cold raw fear skitter through her, a deadly fear that made the hair on her arms stir. Her heart pounded, her mouth was dry.

And she thought, *I'm in the middle of a void and there's no way out because I'm trapped in a black hole larger than anything I can imagine.*

That thought, fully blown and as clear as bright headlights in her brain, shook her to the core. Where had it come from? She couldn't seem to draw a deep breath, couldn't seem to focus her brain. This was ridiculous. She had to think her way out of this. There was an answer, there was always an answer. It was time to get her brain working again. All right then. She was in a cave chamber. She'd simply crawled in farther than she'd thought, the ridiculous chamber was much larger than on the map—

She heard the noise again, a soft, sibilant sound that seemed to

be all around her, but there were no visual reference points, like a snake slithering through sand, a snake so heavy it made a dragging sound as it pulled itself along. It was a snake that was coming toward her but she couldn't see it, couldn't get out of the way, couldn't hide. Maybe it was one of those South American boas, thick as a tree trunk, heavy and sinuous, probably twenty feet long, dragging itself toward her; it would wrap its huge body around her and squeeze— She jerked the compass out of her pocket and hurled it as far away from her as she could. She heard it thud lightly against the cave floor.

The sound stopped. Once again the silence was absolute.

She had to get a grip. Her imagination was having a hoedown.

Stop it, just stop it, you're in a damned squiggly hole deep in the side of a mountain, nothing more than a maze.

Maybe now she was at the center of the maze—bad things could happen at the center of a maze, things you didn't expect, things that could crush your head, smash it into pulp, things . . . She was lost in the silence, she would die here.

Ruth tried to concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply, drawing in the blessed fresh air, and that strange sweet smell, on cutting off the absurd images that wanted to crash into her brain to terrify her, but she couldn't seem to. She couldn't find anything solid, anything real, to latch on to. The fear danced through her. She yelled into the darkness, "Stop being like your father, stop it!" To her relief, the sound of her own voice calmed her. She managed to clamp down on the panic. All she had to do was follow the straight line of the tape measure. It was metal, it couldn't turn