A Novel By MICHAEL KARPOVAGE

CROWN OF SERPENTS



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PRAISE FOR CROWN OF SERPENTS

CROWN OF SERPENTS is a compelling novel deeply rooted in the history of the Six Nations Iroquois. It takes place in contemporary times with fully developed characters and a powerful narrative; its author is well versed in the complexity of modern Iroquois life. Far more than a simple mystery the book follows the path of Tony Hillerman's Navajo based novels by providing the reader with remarkable insights into the culture and traditions of the most influential Native nation east of the Mississippi.

— Doug George-Kanentiio, editor, columnist, author from Akwesasne Mohawk Nation

CROWN OF SERPENTS is a page-turning story with a creative plot backed up with incredible historical tidbits from the author's extensive research. Karpovage's careful crafting throughout compares him very favorably with others in the genre such as Follett and Ludlum.

— Sue Lofstrom, Associate Professor of English, Georgia Perimeter College, Atlanta, GA

I thought: Indiana Jones meets the Godfather! Read the entire book in two sittings. Had to pause occasionally during the first eight-hour read-a-thon to catch my breath. One of the best novels I have ever read!

— Paulette Likoudis, Finger Lakes Times columnist, Lodi, NY

The plot is very intricate but well conducted by the author, the characters are well developed and the narrative is fluent. This mystery thriller grabs the reader and does not let go of him until the end.

— Bruno Gazzo, editor, PS Review of Freemasonry, Genoa, Italy

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I couldn't put it down from the moment I picked it up, until I finished the last page. Karpovage is a name to watch for in future writings...right up there with Dan Brown. I am anxiously awaiting his next novel!

— Brother Alan Johnson, Stone Mountain Lodge #449, Stone Mountain, GA

CROWN OF SERPENTS is a bombshell of a book! Precise maps and historic manuscripts help lend credence to a compelling scavenger hunt that burns across the reservations of Western New York.

— William P. Robertson, Bucktail novelist, Duke Center, PA

Michael Karpovage's character Jake Tununda is fascinating and displays the amazing qualities of a Seneca Indian, an American soldier and true Freemason. The author, being a Freemason, was able to weave the Craft in and out of the story so well that it didn't appear forced and complemented the plot well. He was also able to describe some small secrets about the Craft which only Freemasons would recognize and stays true to any obligation, which is a great accomplishment.

— Brother Jeb W. Carroll, Kenilworth Lodge #29 GRA, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE



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THE TUNUNDA MYSTERIES Book One: *Crown of Serpents (2009)* Book Two: *Map of Thieves (2014)*

> MILITARY THRILLER Flashpoint Quebec (2003)



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



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Karpovage Creative, Inc. designer • map illustrator • publisher www.karpovagecreative.com For my sons Jake and Alex...

AUTHOR'S NOTE

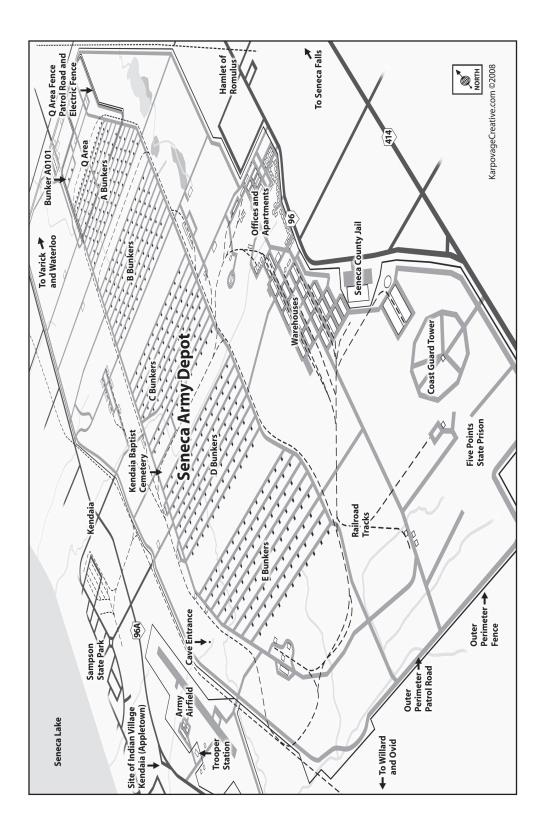
Although *Crown of Serpents* is a work of fiction based on pure speculative narrative, and all the present day characters are creations of my imagination, some of the historical figures in this book are real people. They existed and left records of themselves, some more abundant than others. I tried to be faithful to their actions and encounters as best I could determine from historical sources.

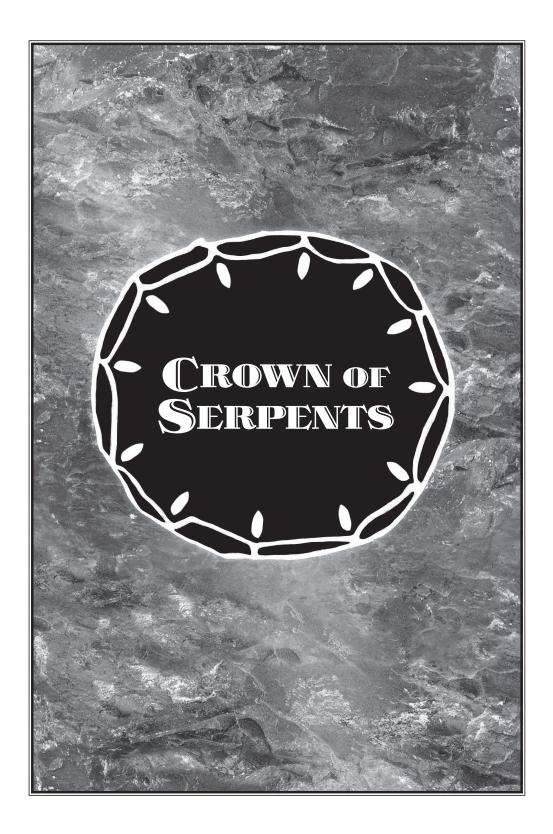
For anyone interested in the historical background of the story within the novel, a timeline of events is provided in the back of this book. As bonus material, I've also included *Betrayed By A Mason?*, a published article based on my research depicting the true historical account of Lieutenant Thomas Boyd's tragic mission and the Masonic circumstances surrounding his death.

Visit **KarpovageCreative.com** for author interviews, book signing events, newsletter subscription, photos, and more.

— Michael Karpovage







PROLOGUE

Monday, September 13, 1779. Seneca Nation territory between Genesee River and Conesus Lake.

L IEUTENANT THOMAS BOYD wrenched his head back as a heavy wooden war hammer passed by his face. The momentum of the missed blow threw the attacking Iroquois Indian off balance and gave the young rebel officer the chance he needed to counterattack with his sword. With a horizontal slice, Boyd opened the Indian's bare tattooed chest. The warrior screamed and looked down at the gaping red gash across his abdomen. He dropped to his knees and bent over on his hands. Boyd finished him off by plunging his sword deep between the Indian's shoulder blades. The hard thrust slammed the warrior flat against the ground. With a boot on his victim's back and a twist of his hand, Boyd extracted his blood-smeared sword and readied himself for the next onslaught.

Movement from behind a tree.

A lone British Ranger, his musket fitted with a dreaded bayonet, charged directly at Boyd. The Ranger made it to within seven feet when a rifle cracked to the officer's right. The Ranger grunted, dropped his musket, and clutched at his face. He stumbled past Boyd and slumped to the ground — dead. Heavy gray smoke drifted over the British trooper, enveloping the officer's next would-be killer.

Boyd, a veteran of the Continental Army under General Sullivan, glanced to his right to see which of his trusted scouts had made the shot. It was his Oneida Indian guide, Honyost Thaosagwat, a courageous fighter from the only breakaway Iroquois nation supporting the American rebellion. He received a wide-eyed nod from Boyd. Thaosagwat gave him a nervous smile in return and took cover behind a boulder to reload his weapon.

Through the wafting battlefield haze, not fifty paces away, a British officer barked the command to fire. Several shots of lead whistled by Boyd's head as he sought cover behind a tree. The volley of enemy musket fire cut down what was left of his small scout detachment. Hugging the tree, he felt a searing sensation rip through his side as a musket ball penetrated his deerskin coat and impacted above his hip. Boyd grimaced and dropped to a knee. He grabbed at his waist, blood oozing between his fingers. Nausea and dizziness immediately swept over him.

"Lieutenant's been hit!"

Boyd looked to the shout. One of his soldiers crouched toward him, scout rifle and powder horn in hand. It was Sergeant Michael Parker.

"We've got to get you out of here, sir."

Through labored breathing, Boyd managed a response. "No, no, it went straight through. Stay in the fight. They'll be coming again."

Parker nodded, "I won't leave your side Lieutenant." He knelt and popped open his horn, poured black powder into his rifle's barrel, reloaded another shot, and then rammed it all home with his rifle rod. His actions were swift and practiced. He then moved to a nearby tree and rested the rifle against the trunk to steady his aim.

Boyd squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his wound tighter, and willed himself to fight on. He looked beyond Parker, wondering how many of his men were still alive inside the grove of sapling trees where they had sought protection. The pressing attack by the British and their Indian allies had nearly decimated his detachment of twenty-nine scout riflemen. And it was completely his fault.

Guided by youthful cockiness and overconfidence, he pushed too far when he deliberately made contact with three Seneca Indians earlier in the day. Thinking he could take their scalps as trophies, Boyd ordered his marksman to open fire while the Indians ate over a campfire. His men killed two, but one had made his escape. Boyd ordered pursuit of the lone Indian against his Oneida guide's recommendation. They pursued their prey through the woods and mistakenly ran into an ambuscade made up of the fiercest combination of wilderness fighters the rebellion had seen. He had led his troops directly into the jaws of four hundred British Rangers, Tories, and Iroquois warriors led by the notorious pair of Colonel John Butler and Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant.

Boyd could clearly hear the specific orders of his commander now ringing inside his throbbing head. The night before, General John Sullivan had ordered him not to make contact with the enemy. His was supposed to be a recon mission only.

The British and Indians had immediately surrounded his men and commenced the ambush. Boyd's marksmen fought back with utmost precision, shooting behind good cover. They felled many but Butler and Brant's sheer numbers ultimately proved too great. The slaughter took its toll after three heavy volleys from the British crack troops. Boyd knew he had no choice but to get his men out. After several unsuccessful organized attempts at breaking through the enemy lines, he had become separated and lost all means of control over his scouts. Each man was on his own.

Now shot through the side and panic-stricken, he looked around as the end closed near. Smoke shifted and he watched brutal hand-tohand combat rage on his right flank. The famous Virginian marksman Timothy Murphy, the best shot in his detachment, had just beaten down an Indian. Boyd's close friend and Brother in the Freemasons, Sergeant Sean McTavish, waved Murphy over as he and several others made one more desperate attempt to break the enemy lines for escape. The battlefield haze shifted across Boyd's vision again and the rest of his scouts vanished.

Parker fired his rifle bringing Boyd back to his immediate surroundings. Parker then moved up, disappearing into his gunpowder-filled cloud. Boyd's vision blurred, his eyes burning in the smoke.

The violence of the battle suddenly subsided.

Two British Rangers emerged from the thick haze to Boyd's front, their bayoneted muskets at the hip. Boyd heard more movement behind him. Turning, he observed a half dozen shirtless, sweat and blood stained Iroquois warriors jump from tree to tree. Donning distinctive war paint, feather headdresses, and decorative jewelry, they clutched war hammers, tomahawks, and hot muskets. Using his sword as a crutch, Boyd staggered to his feet to face their final assault. He knew he was a dead man either way, whether it was the two Rangers at his back or the Iroquois pack of wolves to his front. He could only hope the end would come swiftly.

Instead, time stood still.

The battlefield grew strangely quiet.

Boyd blinked through watery eyes.

A war whoop shattered the silence as a young Seneca Indian made a dash straight for Boyd. But another Indian cut the youngster off. Clad in a fine red cape over a ruffled white blouse with a silver gorget about his neck, there stood their leader. His arm was stretched straight out, blocking the scalp-hungry young warrior from gaining his trophy.

Boyd recognized this man from when he first laid eyes on him at the Battle of Newtown last month — the feared Mohawk chief, Joseph Brant. A captain with the British Army responsible for several massacres against the colonists, Brant was the great persuader who had convinced the other Iroquois nations to ally with the British instead of staying neutral.

Brant strode to within several feet of Boyd, a blood-smeared tomahawk in one hand, a pistol in the other. His plumed headdress swayed atop his closely shaven, battle-tattooed head. His warriors shouted encouragement in anticipation of the kill.

Fear gripped Thomas Boyd's entire body, intensifying all of his senses. He could feel the warmth of his own life-blood spreading across his wound. He became dizzy again. His hands shook. His knees trembled. With a pounding heart ready to burst from his chest, he suddenly remembered Brant's stature as the very first from the Iroquois Confederacy to become an English Freemason. He remembered that Brant had helped two other rebel soldiers escape death back in 1776 at the Battle of Cedars. He knew now there was but one slim chance for survival. Since he and Brant belonged to the same secret fraternity, he could only hope his so-called Brother would honor the ancient obligation of a Mason in distress — and spare his life.

He must make the sign.

With the tip of his officer's sword planted in the ground, Boyd let go

of the hilt and watched it swing away to drop at Brant's feet. Surrender. Boyd then raised both arms, made the secret magical gestures only a fellow Freemason would interpret, and lowered his arms back down to his side. He finished by whispering a single word to Brant. The communication was delivered.

A confused murmur rippled through the group of Indians. The two British Rangers looked at one another then over to Brant. Brant narrowed his eyes and hesitated. He inspected Boyd from head to bloody boot then calmly scanned the battlefield around him. Boyd followed his gaze.

Off to one side, Boyd noticed his battered Sergeant Parker resting on his knees, head silently bowed as the two British Rangers stood over their prisoner with muskets ready to fire. Brant then looked in the opposite direction and became transfixed on several Iroquois warriors just beyond some rocks. Boyd too looked that way.

His Oneida guide Thaosagwat was being held by two other Indians as a third spat in his face. A fourth Indian then snuck up from behind Thaosagwat and buried a tomahawk in the back of his skull. The crunch was crisp. Thaosagwat's legs buckled and he collapsed face first to the ground. His scalp was immediately and thoroughly sliced and peeled back from his head. It was held high in victory.

War whoops echoed through the woods.

Brant turned back and locked eyes with Boyd. They held each other's gaze for several seconds. Boyd never flinched, even as the blood drained from his body.

"Brother, your life is under my protection," Brant finally declared in perfect English. "Should you survive your wound, I'll transport you to Montreal for a prisoner exchange."

With relief, Boyd promptly passed out.

Brant directed his war chiefs to take both Boyd and the other surviving rebel soldier into custody. He then turned and ran off into the thick woods, a group of his warriors at his heels. A Ranger grabbed Boyd's sword before the Indians could get to it, but once they pounced on the unconscious prisoner, the savages stripped him of all clothing and possessions, like vultures on a fresh carcass. The young Seneca warrior who had been denied Thomas Boyd's scalp as a trophy, was one of the Indians pillaging the victim for items of value. He came away with the rebel officer's shiny belt buckle, his hunting knife, powder horn, and a small leather booklet. The youngster fanned the English language pages inside the book and frowned. He had no idea it was Boyd's personal campaign journal. He stuffed the booklet into his pouch thinking he could barter with it later. He then kicked Boyd several times in the ribs to awaken him for the march back to their village. The Seneca warrior still felt the officer's scalp was rightfully his and that he would not be denied taking it again.

He did not have to wait long.

His trophy would come the very next day.

1

Present day. November. Early Monday morning. Cranberry Marsh. North of the Hamlet of Romulus, N.Y.

T HIRTY FEET DEEP inside a rock fissure, U.S. Army Major Robert "Jake" Tununda gained his footing on a ledge, gripped his rescue rope tight, and hugged the stone wall to catch his breath. As he inhaled, the stench of fresh human excrement rose from below and filled his nostrils. He shook his head, the odor somehow triggering a suppressed memory he had stored away for many years. His eyes glazed over for a moment and he remembered himself back as a young infantry captain leading an assault into a shit-filled al-Qaeda underground bunker in Afghanistan. The scene in his head ended in an atrocity he would never forget — his black moment in an otherwise illustrious combat career. Jake pressed his eyes shut and filed the thought back where it belonged, refusing to let it cloud the attempted rescue he was performing. Only now, he thought, as he crinkled his nose, there would probably be a dead body instead to recover below.

It had been about twenty minutes since he had turned north up Route 96 out of the central New York State hamlet of Romulus to continue his early morning rural drive. He had left his home in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and was in route to Rochester, up on Lake Ontario. Deciding to kill the early hours of boredom, he had eavesdropped on his portable police and fire scanner, and to his surprise he had caught the tail end of a local emergency dispatch, complete with Global Positioning Satellite coordinates. The female dispatcher described a man trapped in a well or hole in a marsh. Upon her repeat page of the GPS coordinates Jake was ready with his Chevy Tahoe's on-board navigation system. He typed in the sequence of Latitude: 42 degrees 47'28.04"N and Longitude: 76 degrees 49'51.12"W and found out he was right around the corner from where the victim was supposedly trapped.

Suffering not the slightest hint of hesitation, the 37-year-old former commander of highly trained combat infantrymen, moved into action. Attempting to rescue a stranger in a bad predicament was the embodiment of Jake's personal make-up.

After following the directional waypoint on his navigation system monitor, he motored down a dirt road off 96. It was labeled Marsh Road on his screen. As more chatter filled the radio, Jake heard that the victim's location was apparently on an island in the swamp and next to some old Indian grave.

Bringing his sports utility vehicle to a grinding halt, he jumped out, ran to the rear, and raised the back hatch. Unzipping his handy emergency duffel bag of gadgets and gear he switched his Army dress shoes for a pair of zip-up waterproof boots. He then pulled out his hand-held GPS unit and typed in the same coordinates to guide him through the marsh. Slinging his equipment bag over one shoulder, he followed the directional arrow on his hand-held unit and stepped foot into shin-deep muck.

After quickly trailblazing his way through a combination of marsh and brush, he entered a line of woods and soon arrived at the small island that matched the GPS coordinates. He was first on scene. He then located the supposed well, thought it looked more like an earthquake fissure, and tried to make initial contact with the victim, all the while anchoring his rescue rope to a tree.

Now, resting on the ledge after his climb down inside the shaft and his mind reset on his self-imposed task, he unclipped an already illuminated flashlight from a carabiner. He directed the beam down into a shimmering puddle of soupy red mud. Floating in the muck was a crosshatch of rotted wood, swamp grass, and several pieces of shale that had tumbled in from the surface.

"Anybody down here?" Jake shouted. It was the fifth time. He received

the same response — echoed silence. He shifted his body and moved the flashlight beam further into the hole. He saw a black baseball cap partially submerged in the muck. Embroidered on the hat was a recognizable NASCAR logo alongside a familiar slanted white number three. Floating next to the hat was the top half of a shattered cell phone, its LCD panel grayed-out. Jake's eyes followed the trail of liquid into a wider cave-like room. He bent down on the ledge to get a better view below.

There, lying face down in about four inches of muck was the motionless body of the man who had no doubt placed the call to 9-1-1.

"Son of a bitch," Jake grumbled.

He let go of his safety rope and dropped into the water, the scum splashing his starched green uniform pants tucked into his boots. He slogged over to the body and squatted down as the flashlight beam centered on the back of the man's head. Chips of bone and brain matter were pressed into wet hair where the top of the skull had been crushed. The man's legs lay twisted at irregular angles. The smell of feces was heavy. The backside of the victim's pants was stained with brown discharge. Jake swallowed back a gag. He knew it was useless to even take a pulse, but he'd go through the motions anyway.

Setting the flashlight on a rock so the beam illuminated the back of the cave, his eyes scanned the chamber — solid limestone walls, low ceiling, and a pile of rocks in a corner oddly shaped like a human figure. He looked down at the victim, grabbed hold of a shoulder and hip, and rolled the body onto its back.

The man's wide-open eyes were frozen in a glazed death stare as bloody water rolled off his battered face. He wore a teeth-shattered grimace. Jake sized him up quickly. Unshaven, weathered face with sunken cheeks, midforties. A long gash over his eye revealed a thick mixture of blood and mud. The guy definitely took a beating on his tumble down the hole. Jake looked away, adding the dead man's image to the mosaic of deceased in the storage cabinet of his mind.

He peeled off his rappelling gloves and set them next to his flashlight. Placing two fingers under the man's jaw, he checked the carotid artery for a beat. There was none, of course. He pulled his fingers back and wiped them on his uniform pants before glancing down at the man's abdomen. Plaid shirt covered with a black denim vest, a busted arm with a clenched fist across the stomach. Jake's eyes narrowed as he noticed something clutched in the man's hand.

He grabbed the wrist, turned it over, and exposed the palm. Prying the man's fingers open, he revealed the bottom half of the cell phone. Shaking his head, he closed the hand back up. Then he saw something shiny — halfway out of the vest side pocket — some type of circular item bordered by elongated white wampum shells. He recognized the wampum right away as a common decorative addition to jewelry he had seen growing up on the Seneca Indian reservation.

He carefully pulled the item from the pocket and held it in the flashlight beam. A little larger than a half dollar, the shiny disk was clearly made of old hammered silver. Paralleling the outer wampum border was an inner border of small decorative holes — definitely an Indian motif he had seen in many past artifacts. And in the middle of the circle was a barely noticeable engraved outline of a buck with a full antler rack. Inside the deer's body was a little squiggle with a head and eyes. It reminded Jake of a snake. Separately, the deer and the snake symbols were familiar enough, but arranged in this odd manner was a configuration he had never seen before. He turned the disk over to reveal a pin and clasp made of old materials. Still clinging to the pin was a shred of rotted green cloth.



He concluded the old item was a broach used to hold together the collar of a shirt or coat — quite common as a Native American dress accessory. Did this guy snatch it from the Indian grave above?

"Hello! Hello!" an excited woman shouted from topside, her voice echoing in the chamber. "Anybody down there?" A flashlight beam bounced into the fissure as Jake looked back up.

"Yes! Hello," he shouted back, shielding his eyes.

"Are you okay? We're here to help. Just stay calm," the woman offered. "Are you on this rope line?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Thanks for asking. But the guy who was trapped down here is already dead!"

"What? Say again. Couldn't hear you."

"The victim is dead. The guy who called and said he was trapped, he is *dead*!"

"Who the hell are you then?"

Jake paused, then shouted back. "Jake Tununda, U.S. Army."

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE



Same time. High Point Mountain Casino and Resort, West of Kingston, Ulster County, N.Y.

IMMACULATELY ATTIRED in a black, custom-tailored Italian suit, fifty seven year-old Alex Nero, one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in New York State, stood alone on his penthouse balcony suite overlooking his mountain entertainment complex. He leaned over an iron railing and puffed on a Churchill-sized Cuban cigar. A single silver serpent attached to a necklace dangled from his open collared shirt. With troubled eyes, he gazed down upon the blue waters of Ashokan Reservoir spread out below. He then shifted to the distant beauty of the surrounding Catskill Mountains. A cool early morning breeze fluttered his shoulderlength gray hair as he watched the sun rise from the mist. The view had always lifted his spirits.

Not this morning.

Nero exhaled the nutty flavored smoke of his cigar then looked closer at the sprawling entertainment complex below. He nodded in somewhat self-reassurance at his greatest accomplishment to date.

Named High Point Mountain Casino and Resort after the mountain it sat atop, Nero's gambling facility had just beaten Howe Caverns as the second most visited tourist attraction in the state, behind Niagara Falls. It even rivaled some of Las Vegas' best gambling resorts and certainly put to shame any of the other Native American gaming venues elsewhere in New York. Located just west of the Hudson River near Kingston, this architectural wonder catered to New York City customers and high rollers from all over the world — mostly Saudi Arabian princes, Japanese executives, and European playboys.

An eighteen-hole golf course, a top-notch winery, a private runway, and a spa graced the base of the mountain along the reservoir road. Up on top sat the casino, the hotel, and a members-only, exclusive adultentertainment club. Named Bucks & Does, the club catered to celebrities, athletes, politicians, and VIPs. Nero stocked it with the finest looking men and women money could buy. It's where he did most of his political lobbying and where he had spent most of the previous night with a contingent of Seneca County officials from whom he would be purchasing 8,000 acres of land on the abandoned Seneca Army Depot.

Along with his core businesses at the top of the mountain was his personal museum named the Haudenosaunee Collection. This collection was ranked as one of the best in the world and where he spent most of his time in search of rare northeastern Native American artifacts. Nero had even constructed his summit facilities in a luxurious mountain lodge style of architecture reminiscent of the ancient Iroquois culture that once ruled the area.

High Point, he mockingly mused with a grunt, was an appropriate name for his flagship business. He had fulfilled his personal climb to the pinnacle of wealth, women, power, and political influence. He had everything a man with his ambition could hope for in a lifetime. But still it was not enough to quench his thirst.

Nero coveted a permanent place in history, just as his Onondaga warrior forefathers had done in defense of the ancient Confederacy. He too wanted that essence of historical immortality, to be known for ages to come. That would be the true High Point legacy, he thought — to never be forgotten in history. That was his ultimate goal.

And his path was almost complete. In the most recent Confederacy election, he had finally won the coveted title of Tadodaho or Head Chief of the Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. It was a spiritual position he had sought for years. Granted he had to put some key people on his payroll, but he gained his desire. Always had. The Tadodaho was a figurehead position held only by an Onondaga. It was a rubber stamp position to the chiefs of the other tribes and their outdated traditionalist beliefs. But Nero had grander plans. He aimed to change the position into the true dictatorship it once was. He sought complete control — authority over all the separate Iroquois nation-tribes, in and out of the state.

His ancient bloodline demanded it.

Securing his place as the rightful ruler, he would set in motion his ultimate objective of retaking all Iroquois lands stolen by the U.S. and New York State governments. He would centralize the pathetically weak and splintered tribal nations back into the powerful empire they once were and deserved to be again. He would wreak cultural and civil havoc, and claim a true sovereign confederacy right in the heart of the Empire State.

Yet he frowned. Because there was one elusive item that would help him gain the unstoppable power to defeat his foes and he still had no solid clues as to where it resided.

The item was called the Crown of Serpents. It was once owned by the most powerful ruler of his tribe, Nero's ancient Onondaga forefather named Atotarho. This shaman had perfected the crown's abilities to suppress his enemies and heal his friends many centuries ago. Supposedly, the relic held legendary powers, not only medicinal, but also more importantly, of complete mind control. And then it disappeared. It had actually been stolen from Atotarho then hidden away and never seen again.

Generations of Nero's clan members had sought to find the crown ever since, but they were poor, scattered, and did not have the means to conduct serious searches or excavations. The ignorant uneducated tribal members even questioned the legend to begin with. But ten years ago, Nero's late mother had made a breakthrough discovery.

During one of her magical black arts sessions, the old medicine woman unveiled a prophecy that centered on Alex Nero himself finding and using the artifact. She had said a sign would reveal itself to him, that he was the rightful bloodline recipient, that the spirits beyond the sunset had predicted it, but that he should respect and use the crown with great care, never to abuse it. The most important clue his mother had gleaned from the paranormal world of spirits she communicated with, was the symbol of the guardian cult that supposedly had kept the crown hidden for so long. The symbol she had envisioned was that of a silhouetted white buck, and inside of the buck's belly was a snake.

Until her death two years ago, she had headed up his Haudenosaunee Collection, and with him had spent countless hours pursuing leads to find remnants of the lost cult and its symbol. They had focused their efforts in the area between the two largest Finger Lakes of Seneca and Cayuga — because of the link with the famous white deer herd there and the location of the lost Seneca village of Kendaia, once a spiritual Mecca of the Iroquois. But they had come up empty. The main obstacles to their search were the U.S. properties of Sampson State Park and the abandoned 10,000-acre Seneca Army Depot.

Up until now.

The Depot had been put up for sale by Seneca County, a real estate transaction Nero jumped all over. Money was not an issue. Local politics were. And keeping the sale anonymous until the last moment was paramount to his transaction. Unfortunately, word had leaked out that an Indian was interested in the sale. Now the local waters were rippling with fear, anger, and resentment.

Everything, up until now, was working out for him. He could see the path to the top. His goal was near. He wasn't upset with the media leak. He could deal with that with extortion and bribery. His problem was if he didn't reach his pinnacle within six months or less, he'd be six feet under.

As of last week and several professional second opinions later, the diagnosis of full-blown, stage four throat cancer had been confirmed. The doctors had given him less than six months to live if he did not seek treatment immediately.

He shook his head in utter disbelief, taking yet another puff on his cigar, still defiant of the possibility that he might travel beyond the sunset before he could culminate his final ambitious acts. He ground his teeth together with a screech.

Six months.

Nero looked down and angrily tapped the ashes from his long cigar.

It would be his greatest challenge — to beat the white man's disease. He watched the ashes float away, disintegrating above the throngs of his white scum customers filing in and out of the main entrance to his casino. Near the valet-service he also noticed his black Hummer waiting for him.

Two of his hand picked bodyguards stood by the vehicle pacing rather impatiently. After all, a carved-up body stuffed in a barrel in the back of the SUV surely weighed heavily on their minds. It was Nero's top pit boss, caught in an elaborate plan to bilk him out of millions of dollars. The *missing* Indian was waiting to be sunk in the reservoir under Nero's personal watch. After that, he would catch his flight to Buffalo later in the day.

On tap in Buffalo was his first meeting with doctors at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute to discuss surgical options and his regimen of treatments. It was a trip Nero had not wanted to make. He had never believed in western methods of healing, but now his choices were limited. If only his mother were still alive she could have conjured up one of her ancient remedies and fixed everything, or so he had hoped.

There was one glimmer of good news though. Late yesterday, his new collections director had surprised him with a short-notice acquisitions opportunity at Old Fort Niagara. She told him there were several recently discovered items from an American Revolutionary War officer and he would be given a full viewing with a chance to purchase them. One of the items that piqued his interest was the officer's scalp. It was taken by Seneca Indians during the American campaign of 1779 to destroy the Iroquois homelands. It would make a fine trophy for the Confederacy — a priceless highlight for his private Scalp Room deep within his mountain museum.

Nero took another pull on his cigar thinking it would be a good diversion after his Roswell meeting. And probably would be the last scalp he'd ever add to his collection.

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE



Cranberry Marsh. Thirty minutes later.

UNDER LEAFLESS TREES backlit by a slate gray sky, Jake stood shivering in his filth-covered Army dress shirt and slacks. He had just crawled out from the clammy hole after securing the victim's body for the local fire department. He hadn't wanted to put any of the volunteer firefighters at risk since there was only room for one person in the tight shaft anyway. It was the least he could do to spare them the same disgust he had waded into. The adrenaline rush of a possible rescue had long since worn off. All he wanted now was a hot shower and dry clothes. He heaved a sigh of relief as the final phase of the body recovery came to a close.

The rescuers had lowered a wire Stokes body basket, a portable radio, a digital camera, and an evidence collection bag to him shortly after they arrived on the scene and determined who he was and how he had climbed down there. Under cramped quarters, Jake had lifted the body up and strapped it into the basket, the blood and mud soiling his uniform. He was then directed to take pictures and recover as much evidence as possible by the woman who had first shouted down to him.

She had adamantly made it known she was a New York State Police investigator and wanted him to follow her direct orders since he was messing up her scene and compromising evidence. He had gathered the broken cell phone pieces and the silver broach, placed them in the bag and then took multiple photos of the scene and victim. When finished he took the victim's baseball cap and placed it back on his head. He wondered what the loud-mouthed investigator would think of that once the body returned topside.

Upon emerging from the hole, Jake returned the evidence bag, camera, and radio to the fire captain he had been in contact with during the operation. Several more firefighters greeted him with a pat on the back for his efforts. The captain and a South Seneca Ambulance paramedic checked Jake for injuries and then, shaking his hand, thanked him for a job well done. Jake assured the medic he was fine and was left with a gray wool blanket which he wrapped around his shoulders.

The captain asked Jake to stand back before giving the order for the recovery team to haul the body up. The captain then walked the evidence bag over to a woman in a dark blue baseball cap squatting down at a mound of earth. Three law enforcement personnel flanked her. Long auburn hair swayed through the back clasp of her hat. Jake read the words *State Police* on the back of her blue field jacket. She spun around, caught his gaze, slowly looked him up and down, and frowned. Jake turned back to the recovery.

Four firefighters in yellow bunker gear and helmets pulled for several minutes on a utility rope to extract the victim. The body, with a skewed racing cap on his bashed-in head, finally made it out. The rope team set down their line as the basket surfaced next to the hole. The captain announced on his radio that the body had been recovered. A static-filled voice of a woman on the radio affirmed his message.

One of the volunteers on the team, an overweight, sweat-soaked young man with a scruffy goatee, looked toward Jake, eyeing him with genuine disgust. Jake stared back until the volunteer glanced away, fumbling with his equipment. A large, red circular sticker decorated the side of the volunteer's helmet. *Don't Sell Our Lands* it blared, a red slash through an Indian head profile.

In a barely audible sarcastic tone, Jake heard the young man say to his fellow firefighter, "Another noble savage to the rescue. Low life red faces are popping up everywhere these days." He then chuckled. The other firefighter walked away telling the kid to grow up.

Many a quick judgment had been made about Jake before. He had

heard the whispers of lower ranked soldiers denounce his warrior ancestry or his intimidating zeal to lead from the front. He had heard the nicknames but had not been bothered. The nicknames actually were a form of flattery. But when it came down to an outright racist provocation he confronted each individual head-on and never backed down. This pudgy volunteer was certainly no exception.

With a pulsating jaw, Jake walked up on the lone volunteer and stepped into the kid's personal space. "You all pissed off that some red face got here first and stole your glory, eh hero?"

"What the f—!" The volunteer jumped back in surprise. He then angrily folded his arms across his chest. "I didn't say a thing, man. You must be hearing shit. Besides what your kind doing out here anyway?"

Jake's blood went hot. "My kind?" he questioned loudly. He stood nose to nose with the young man. Several heads turned their way. Jake pointed over to the body basket. "My *kind* was trying to saving that guy's damn life."

"We don't need no Indians out here, trying to take things from us."

"Take things from you?" spat Jake. He advanced a step forward, forcing the volunteer back. "You got a screw loose in that so-called brain of yours?"

The volunteer recoiled. "I mean threatening to steal our rightful county property over at the Depot. What did your tribe do, call you in since you're with the Army or something? Them lands belong to taxpaying people of this county. Not some so-called sovereign Indian nation that's going to put up another casino, another gas station, and another cigarette store and not pay taxes on any of it!"

Jake tossed his head back and mockingly laughed. Now he got it the pending sale of the abandoned Seneca Army Depot lands, a sprawling weapons storage facility not a mile to the west. He should have known this was coming out of left field. The volunteer's anti-Indian helmet sticker said it all.

"Listen," replied Jake, with a wry grin and tepid tone. "You seriously must be on meth or something to make a leap like that. I just happened to be driving through, heard the radio call, and acted. So next time, before you soil my race and my uniform, you better think twice about wagging that little tongue of yours."

The volunteer's upper lip curled. His jaw muscles twitched. He was just about to spit something back when the captain walked up.

"Get your ass back to the truck now!" barked the fire officer. He wore a stone cold expression on his face. The volunteer immediately huffed off into the swamp without saying a word.

The captain turned to Jake, hiding his eyes under the rim of his red helmet. In a low voice of utter embarrassment, he said, "I apologize about firefighter Owens, sir. He does not represent the views of our department."

Jake shook his head. "Captain, all I have to say is good timing because his jaw was as good as broken with one more piece of bullshit coming out of his mouth."

The captain looked up. "Sir, I wish you would have. I wouldn't have stopped you. None of the cops would have either. Tommy Owens is our resident no-brains jackass. Every department has one. Problem is we need all the vollies we can get because of manpower shortages. And sometimes they aren't the brightest crayon in the box."

"Listen, I hear you," replied Jake. He cooled his tone with a light chuckle. "You should see some of the loose nuts we recruit in the Army. Believe me, a high school diploma is a terrible thing to waste." He smiled and shook hands with the captain indicating no harm was done.

"Thanks Major. I appreciate your understanding. Listen, the state police investigator said to not to leave the scene until she gets your statement."

"Figured that."

The captain walked off, wishing Jake good luck with everything. But inside Jake still simmered at the volunteer's ignorance. He knew the broken treaty land claims, in reference to property the Iroquois lost after the American Revolution, had been a hot button issue in New York State for decades, but he had never come face to face with the emotions it had brewed. Tempers on both sides of the fight had always been high, especially on the issues of sovereignty, tax collection, and gambling. At one boiling point years ago, riots even had to be suppressed by the State Police on the Onondaga Nation south of Syracuse. And eventually, lives were lost during a Mohawk tribal stand off up in the Adirondacks. Finally, cooler heads had prevailed, and in 2006 all land claim lawsuits were put to rest with a Supreme Court ruling *against* the Indians. But now the pending sale of the interior of the abandoned Seneca Army Depot raised the slumbering political beast back to the surface once again. It was a story Jake had been following off and on simply because of the military history attached to the famous Army facility.

Constructed in the 1940s between the two largest Finger Lakes, the sprawling 10,000-acre base had served the important role as a storage installation for every piece of weaponry and ammunition in the U.S. Army's arsenal since World War II. The Depot, as locals named it, later became the transshipment point for nuclear bombs and missiles servicing the entire eastern theater of military operations. The Department of Defense, however, never officially confirmed nor denied the existence of nuclear weapons at the installation. Unofficially, investigators had shown beyond a reasonable doubt that weapons were there.

But after fifty years of distinguished service, the Depot's mission shifted and Congress shut it down in the mid-nineties. It was then turned over to county officials for re-development. The Seneca County Industrial Development Agency immediately solicited new investors to take over the land and pre-existing structures in order to reinvent the base into something beneficial to the local and state economy. In just a few short years, private corporations bought up most of the main structures on the eastern side near the hamlet of Romulus. There, a state prison and a county jail were constructed while on the far western side, near Seneca Lake along the southwest perimeter adjacent to the defunct airfield, a new State Trooper sub station and a fire-training facility had been added.

But it was the huge, fenced-in, 8,000-acre parcel of the interior of the base that had remained abandoned for years. It had served as an ecology-tourism attraction and wildlife habitat and had thus become overgrown with weeds and cracked pavement as it aged. This inner area contained all 519 weapons and ammunition storage bunkers, some operations buildings, unique wetlands, and in the middle of it all the world's largest herd of

white deer. Just the sheer magnitude alone of managing the famous deer herd and repairing the twenty-four miles of chain-link perimeter fencing that contained them was sucking the county coffers dry. The county had needed to sell the unused land and when an anonymous individual offered to buy it all their prayers seemed answered.

Apparently, what was getting the locals all fired up again wasn't the fact that the land was being sold at all, but instead to whom. A media leak just a week ago revealed the anonymous buyer as a very wealthy Iroquois Indian philanthropist. As a result, a majority of local residents immediately speculated worse case scenarios. Some feared if the Indians started buying Depot lands then next on the list would be laying claim to their own homes and private property and rekindling the old lawsuits again as the Cayuga tribe did years back. Others concluded that an Indian-owned casino would immediately be built on the base, disrupting their tranquil, rural way of life by adding traffic and crime to the area. Small business owners added to the fracas by noting that several of their tax-paying, American-owned gas marts recently had to shut their doors because of the tribal competition spreading in the area. They figured an Indian-owned Depot would spur even more tribal-owned businesses directly stealing away customers, especially with the incentives of tax-free Indian gasoline and tobacco products. In fact, when driving through the hamlet of Romulus earlier Jake had even recalled a sign in front of a boarded up convenience store that read Another Business Lost to the Indians.

The dramatic leap of racist judgment from the volunteer was a result of legitimate arguments and fears, Jake now realized. On the other hand, he also knew the continued transition of the government-owned Depot to the private sector was already an economic success story that had benefited taxpayers by adding more jobs and expanded economic growth for the area. If this Indian philanthropist, whoever he or she was, could provide that same entrepreneurial leadership, the situation could be a win-win for both sides.

Not only had Jake taken an interest in the Depot from its historical role in the Army, but he also had an interest in that unique white deer herd from an ancestral point of view. The deer had been fenced in, managed, and protected by the U.S. Army since 1941. What would be their fate now should a private owner come in? What tribe did this owner represent? Was he or she from an estranged out-of-state tribe or a New York based tribe? The problem was that Jake's own Seneca Indian ancestors and their neighboring Cayuga tribe had held the white deer herd sacred as far back as the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy. From the legends he learned as a child, he knew a white deer was a symbol of protecting the peace between the original five tribal nations that formed the confederacy. On several occasions when he was much older and driving past the Depot with his beloved Uncle Joe, Jake had even caught a rare glimpse of the white deer — behind the perimeter fencing on Route 96A along the west side of the base. Their natural beauty was simply astounding. But because of their stature, they were also considered an elite trophy in the world of sport hunting.

What Jake was hearing about their fate disturbed him. Speculation held that if the land was sold, the new owner could charge an admission fee to hunt the white deer on his private 8,000-acre wildlife preserve. The owner could market it as containing the best stock in the world regardless of the herd's historical significance or its sacred roots.

Jake shook his head. He didn't know the answer. There were too many variables. Ultimately, these local political issues were out of his control. He was just an outside observer. Despite his best intentions, he couldn't solve all of the world's problems. Heck, serving as the world's police force in the U.S. Army taught him that. Trying to save a fringe deer herd in a remote rural county was best left to someone else.

It wasn't his mission.

He looked down at his watch. "7:20. Good." This side escapade he had gotten himself into still allowed him time to issue his police statement, get his uniform cleaned, and not miss his appointment in Rochester for his afternoon lecture at the Army's 98th Division Headquarters. But first he wanted to check out something most interesting to him before packing up — the Indian gravesite. He salivated at what contents might be inside.

Walking toward the mound, he noticed a group of emergency officials already huddled together. They included an African-American State Trooper in his gray uniform and ten-gallon Stetson hat, and two Seneca County sheriff's deputies — one older and bigger, one obviously a young rookie and much skinnier — both in their dark blue uniforms and matching caps. The female state police investigator stood there too, speaking and pointing to the opening of the grave. Jake quietly approached the group from behind and leaned against a tree to listen in. The older deputy sheriff, a large-boned, pot-bellied, rat-faced man smoking a cigarette, turned as Jake's presence was felt. He wore a scowl on his face. Pulling the butt from his lips, he exhaled and folded his arms across his chest, nodding Jake a greeting. Jake returned the gesture noticing the deputy's nametag as *Wyzinski*.

What Jake overheard from the group of cops was that the victim had apparently stepped into the Indian grave by mere accident as he had claimed over 9-1-1, but then proceeded to ransack it — as evident by the silver broach Jake had found on his body. The investigator concluded, based on footprints, that after the theft occurred when the victim was backing out, he had fallen right through some loose shale and into the limestone shaft. He held on long enough to call 9-1-1 and for them to get his GPS coordinates, but then lost his grip and plunged in. To his death. Or as the investigator put it, blunt force trauma to the head.

Deputy Wyzinski immediately spoke up. "Good riddance. The guy was a piece of dogshit anyway." He tossed his butt on the ground and stomped it out. Jake noticed the investigator flinch, her eyes glaring at the cigarette butt.

The big black State Trooper added a remark. "Chalk this one up as a praiseworthy accidental death." He smiled with bleached teeth.

The other deputy, the pencil thin mustached young man, chimed in too. "What was he drinking? Old Milwaukee? What'd they say in that commercial? *It doesn't get any better than this!*"

The three male cops snorted with laughter.

The female investigator ignored them and peered into the grave mound. She rubbed her chin, still not realizing Jake was behind her. She then glanced over at the hole in the ground. "I'm not sending anyone back down there. Too dangerous. Our would-be rescuer did a good enough job already. I have enough to go on."

Jake grinned.

The cops grunted their agreement, then as a group, trudged away toward the body basket for some more derogatory comments. The female investigator split off, picked up the extinguished cigarette butt discarded by the veteran cop, and headed over to the on-scene emergency commander — the fire chief — as denoted by his white helmet ranking. Jake was left alone near the Indian grave. It was obvious the victim and local law enforcement had several run-ins. To blatantly show such lack of respect for a dead person, the victim must have committed some major crime.

Wrapping the wool blanket around him a bit tighter, Jake bent down to peer inside the grave mound. Under a partially collapsed ceiling of weeds, mud, and a framework of rotted wood, there sat an upright skeleton wrapped in deteriorating green and blue cloth. The Indian's skull, still with strands of long gray hair attached, was cocked sideways and sticking out from under its shroud. The bottom jaw was missing. The jawbone, cracked in half but still having some teeth rooted, lay on the ground near several pottery items, beads, and flint arrowheads. How ironic, Jake thought. Here might have been an important chief or even a clan mother from his own Seneca tribe or possibly from the Cayuga tribe that once shared this land. And he was now the one getting crapped on for even setting foot back on his ancestor's old grounds.

On the far side of the skeleton lay a dirty deerskin wrapping. Upon closer inspection he found the fur wasn't the typical brown but actually white. He scratched his temple, his mind spinning. A link to the sacred white deer herd, maybe to the symbol on the broach? But why bury the body in the middle of a marsh on a tiny remote island? Was there even a marsh here way back then? Did the white deer herd once roam this area too? Was this some sacred or spiritual location? Was there a connection to the well? Was it really a well or just some type of natural ground fissure, say from an ancient earthquake?

Replaying what he saw in the hole, Jake remembered the pile of rocks at the back wall of the cave. It seemed out of place, as if someone had deliberately stacked them there — again wild speculation. And also when the shaft became properly lit with rescue lights from above, he couldn't help but notice there were several rock ledges or steps that made climbing back out much easier. The ledges almost acted as a natural staircase. Were they carved that way? And the crosshatched rotted wood that had fallen in from the surface seemed strange too. Could it have been a concealed trapdoor on the surface at one point? It was definitely man-made. Or maybe the well was just some sort of ancient salt mine. He did know that Indians at one time had gathered salt in the area, especially around marshes.

Jake sighed. He could ponder the possibilities for days. He wanted to investigate more, but realized, after checking his watch again, time was growing short. He needed to get washed up and back on the road. He definitely planned on returning on his time off though, maybe hooking up with an excavation team to find out more. He stood up and sauntered toward the group around the body basket as two new firefighters emerged from the swamp. They carried a piece of plywood over to the ground hole and covered it up. Their captain barked an order, and the other firefighters picked up the body basket. He instructed them to carry it out through the marsh to the Seneca County Coroner's van parked at their staging area. Several of men griped about the notoriously lazy old coroner who had refused to walk through the swamp to officially pronounce the victim dead. Grunting their disapproval, they stepped off the island and struggled to get their footing in the murky waters.

Watching the men carry away the body, Jake realized that once again he found himself at the center of the action. It was the story of his life right place, right time. Scratch that, he corrected himself, the wrong time this morning.

He stole a glance at the fire chief who was just ending his conversation with the woman investigator. Dressed in full bunker gear, the chief turned and faced Jake. The man was an obvious leader in physical presence alone. Tall and barrel-chested, he wore a handlebar mustache and spectacles. Jake estimated his age to be late-fifties. The chief pulled a portable radio out of his coat pocket and turned his back on Jake. Jake read the large white letters on the back of his coat, *Fire and Rescue*, and his name at the bottom, *Bailey*.

"Cranberry command to county dispatch?" the chief broadcast in a slow deep voice.

"Go ahead chief," the radio hissed back in a faster female voice Jake recognized as the original dispatcher he heard in his SUV.

The chief keyed the transmit button. "All units leaving the scene and heading back to the staging area at Hirschman's Farm. We're sealing off the well too. The state investigator will be out here a while longer to finish her report." As he spoke, his fire captain placed several large rocks on the edges of the plywood to weigh it down over the hole. The chief gave him a thumbs-up and motioned him to head back.

The radio crackled again, confirming the chief's report. "Affirmative. The well is sealed. All units back to staging area. Investigator still on scene. 7:42. KED-758 out."

Pocketing his radio, the chief turned around and deliberately settled his eyes back on Jake. With a stern glare, he approached. The way the chief swaggered over, Jake figured another sparring match was in the making. The chief glanced down over his spectacles at Jake's Army rank and nametag.

"How do you pronounce your name Major?" he slowly asked.

"TUNUN-DA."

The chief smiled widely and surprisingly extended his right hand. Jake gladly accepted and gave a bone-crushing squeeze in return.

"Hoo-ah, Major Tununda. I'm Chet Bailey. Just wanted to personally thank you for your effort down there in that God-for-saken shit hole. My captain says you'd make a great member of his rescue team."

Jake cracked a grin, catching the *Hoo-ah*, Army slang for a job well done when addressing a fellow soldier. "Thanks chief. But it was your crew who had to haul the basket up. I just secured it tight to make their job easier. Hey, so when did you serve?"

Bailey snorted, took off his glasses and started to clean them. "Early seventies. 82nd Airborne. Was in that jungle clusterfuck of 'Nam.' Couldn't wait to get the hell out."

"Can't blame you," Jake nodded, knowing full well how politicians screwed up that past war. He could relate. In fact, politicians usually screw up everything they touch.

"Yourself? When'd you get in?"

"Signed up at seventeen years old," Jake replied. "ROTC at Cornell. Been with the 10th Mountain for the last twenty years. Tours in every hotspot. A hell of a rollercoaster ride let me tell you."

"I'll be damned," said the chief. "An Ivy-League university trained combat officer." He winked.

Jake grinned back. "A rare breed indeed. Just don't tell Senator John Kerry that." They both laughed.

Fresh from college with a bachelor degree in American history and a Reserve Officers' Training Corps commission as a second lieutenant, Jake had been assigned to one of the busiest divisions of the Army — the 10th Mountain — up at Fort Drum in Watertown, New York. The soldiers of the 10th were renowned for their high level of physical agility, their ability to foot-march for long periods of time, their proficiency in combat tactics, and their will to close with and destroy the enemy in some of the most treacherous climates conceivable. The 10th gave him all the combat experience he had longed for and more.

But after twenty years of constant deployments to the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq, he needed a change of pace that didn't require him to kill somebody or be killed in the process. Coupled with the incessant bullshit politics the higher he advanced in rank, the rigors of combat had worn him down psychologically. He had been surrounded by death in a never-ending cycle of human conflict. And history told him that despite his best intentions of trying to make a difference, the inherent gene disposition of humans killing humans would never end. He felt he had given enough to the world and now it was his time to settle back — to start a new chapter in life — and to enjoy it.

"My last job was Executive Officer of the 2-14th Infantry Battalion, 10th Mountain," explained Jake. "Experienced a lot of twisted shit out there in the field." A career move had been definitely in order for Jake, but not out of the military. A year and a half ago he decided to pursue his other passion — military history — and enrolled in an accelerated master degree program. "I just landed a nice, non-combat role with the Army's Military History Institute based out of Carlisle, Pennsylvania."

"I've heard of MHI," the chief acknowledged, sliding his glasses up his nose. "You guys do some interesting work. Hey, so lemme ask you, how the hell'd you get on-scene here so quickly?"

Before replying, Jake noticed the state police investigator inch her way over within earshot of their conversation. He raised his voice slightly so he wouldn't have to re-explain the events to her again later. He told the chief he had left his home in Carlisle some five hours south, where MHI is based, and decided to take the more scenic route through Ithaca and then up through the Finger Lakes for his afternoon appointment further north in Rochester. He deliberately passed by the old Seneca Army Depot trying to catch an early morning glimpse of the famous white deer. Not seeing any deer, he continued north through Romulus and, just out of sheer boredom, happened to turn on his police and fire scanner. The event in the hole unfolded simply as a result of him picking up the GPS coordinates on his scanner and finding himself right around the corner from the victim. "Dumb luck, I guess you could say," Jake offered with a shrug of his shoulders.

The chief praised the benefits of the GPS cell phone tracking software.

"Worked great," agreed Jake. "My hand-held led me right to the shaft. Almost fell in myself. Didn't matter though. Poor guy must have slipped down after he made the original 9-1-1 call. He knocked his head on a rock or something. Was all busted up. Dead on arrival."

"If only you knew that poor bastard," replied the chief as he shook his head. He pointed to a few objects sitting in the weeds next to the Indian mound Jake hadn't noticed before. Three empty Old Milwaukee beer cans sat next to a rusted leg trap used to catch muskrat.

"His name's Derrick Blaylock. Well known here in south Seneca County. Was doing some illegal trapping and some early morning drinking, looks like. Same crap he pulled two months ago."

"What did he do then?"

"Shot a white deer on the Depot lands."

Jake paused, blinked a few times and said, "You know there's a well

documented story out there that anyone who shoots and kills a white deer will soon meet a similar fate."

"Yep, I heard that one too. There's been a number of Army personnel over the years that killed the white deer on the base and one way or the other something bad happened to them too. It's sort of a local mystery. Hell, there's lots of mysteries surrounding that old Depot."

Jake nodded. "But how did he find an Indian grave out here in the swamp?"

"According to the investigator he basically stumbled on it by accident. Then got his own ass trapped in the hole. Listen, this guy was what we call a real woodchuck, a real piece of white trash. He was a level-three sex offender who liked young boys. Add grave robbing to his list too. All said, he won't be contributing his talents to the community anymore."

Jake shook his head. No wonder the cops practically spit on his body. He told the chief he had found the Indian broach in Blaylock's vest pocket, confirming that the victim did steal it.

"Yep. My captain gave that jewel to the investigator and she made a match to the same cloth that Indian skeleton is wrapped in. Plus, Blaylock had some arrowheads in his pants pockets and a small piece of jawbone and tooth that just so happens to match the missing piece off the skeleton." The chief's radio suddenly squawked in his coat pocket. It was one of his firefighters. He acknowledged the call. "Cranberry command. Go ahead."

"Chief. We've got a News10Now reporter here at the Hirschman Farm staging area. She won't take no for an answer. Says you owe her one."

"Ah damn, I know who it is. Tell her I'll be there shortly," the chief replied.

"10-4," finished the firefighter.

"Major, I've got to fend off the vultures. Do you need an ambulance? Get you checked out?"

Jake assured the chief he was already looked after, that he was fine, just dirty, wet, and cold. The chief responded with an open invitation for a beer next time he was passing through. He then sloshed back in the swamp leaving Jake alone with the New York state police investigator.

She immediately closed the gap and planted herself squarely in front

of him, hands on hips, jaw jutted forward, apparently ready to give him a piece of her mind. Despite her aggressive demeanor, she had an air of powerful attractiveness about her. No make up, she was a natural beauty. She looked a bit Hispanic, maybe a touch Asian. He admired the sizzle in her green eyes and how they tapered off at the corners as her fiery gaze met his. Although her lean body stood a bit shorter than his five-foot-ten inch frame, she made up the size difference with the look of scorn.

"You botched my crime scene," she snarled.

Jake arched one of his black brows. A wry grin formed at the corner of his mouth.

"Next time you try being a hero, mister, make sure you follow certain rules. Number one," — her long slender index finger popped up in his face — "let the professionals handle the job. Number two," another finger. "If you plan on climbing into a hole anytime soon, call 9-1-1 so we know we're rescuing two people. Number three—" The third finger never came up.

"Can the lecture!" Jake retorted with a slight smirk. Taken aback, the investigator gave a head wiggle. Now it was Jake's turn. "Number one, I am a trained professional rescue specialist. This was a cakewalk. No one had to rescue me. Number two. I was closest when the call went out, so sorry to rain on your parade, lady. Number three—" He never finished.

"Oh no. You will address me as investigator, don't ever call me *lady*, understand?"

"Fine. Investigator. Do you have an actual name that goes with your fancy title?" He noticed a small pin on her collar showing the rank stripes of sergeant.

She blinked twice. "Name's Rae Hart."

"Well then, Investigator Rae Hart, you will address me as Major Jake Tununda since I outrank you."

Rae rolled her eyes and gave him another comeback. "Pulleeze, this is my turf, soldier." Her eyes quickly summarized Jake's weathered face. Cheekbones high, nose prominent between light brown eyes with crow's feet. Graying temples blending in with shortly cropped black hair. Not bad, she thought, for a split second. "Being the Good Samaritan is not always the best option," she said, her voice wavering ever so slightly. "Leave it to the locals next time."

"And never taking a risk in life is the greatest failure," Jake countered.

She gave him a condescending head to toe body scan, noticed no wedding band and was about to bite on his bait but instead turned and walked away.

Jake shrugged the blanket up his neck and shook with feigned coldness. "Brrrr. Now that was a chilly reception."

She ignored him.

He'd play her game. Turning his back on her, Jake walked over to gather his duffel bag. Stuffing his gear back in, he could now suddenly feel her stare digging into his back. Dropping the blanket, he pulled off his soiled dress shirt and his sweat-stained under shirt and tossed them into his bag. He stood up and stretched out his naked, well-defined, wedgeshaped back, then rolled his arms and shoulders to work out the kinks in his muscles.

Rae's eyes inspected every inch of him as he bent over and pulled a gray hooded sweatshirt from his bag. He turned around as he pulled it on, exposing a tattooed shoulder, chiseled chest, and cut biceps. He wrestled into the sweatshirt as his six-pack abs rippled. She could feel her face warm.

She couldn't help but give him one more dig. "You always come that prepared?"

"Yes ma'am," he said rather curtly, pulling the sweatshirt down to reveal stenciled gold and black letters of the word *Army*. "You never know when you might end up being shafted." His last word he timed perfectly as he zipped his duffel bag shut with a tug. He then stood upright and flung the bag over his shoulder readying to exit the scene.

Rae's mouth fell open. She then pursed her lips and finally smiled. "Major Tununda, listen, I still have to get your contact information and have some questions for you before wrapping up the investigation. And actually since—"

Jake spun around with a grin. "Hey, call me Jake."

"Touché Jake. Listen, I overheard you saying you work with the Military History Institute. You're a historian?" "That's right, a traveling field historian," he said, taking a few steps closer. "Kind of a battlefield detective, if you will."

"You've got some Native American in you," she stated while tucking a loose fall of hair back behind her ear. "Are you Iroquois by any chance?"

He wasn't sure where she was leading but definitely caught the subtle flirtation of adjusting her hair. Now he took the bait. "I like to think of myself as a full-blooded American first," he said. "Half Englishman and half of Haudenosaunee ancestry, specifically from the Tonawanda Band of Seneca Indians. Grew up on the reservation over near Akron."

"You know I've heard that term Haudenosaunee used before but never understood the difference between that and Iroquois," Rae confessed.

Jake was more than happy to oblige her with an answer. He went on to explain that the traditionalist Indians in New York liked to refer to themselves as the Haudenosaunee, or the *longhouse people*, based on the original wooden structures they used to build. They didn't care for the Iroquois label, as that was a term given to them by their enemies. *Iroqu* came from the Algonquin tribe who had battled the Haudenosaunee for many generations. It meant rattlesnake. When the French arrived on scene they added the *ois* to make it plural. Either word was acceptable though, he assured her.

"You're certainly versed on the subject. Maybe you can help me out here," she said, gesturing toward the grave. "This is an Iroquois Indian, right? I mean based on first observation at least. Like what the corpse is wearing, the artifacts, the location here in the original homeland, and the grave structure itself. It all adds up, correct?"

Jake stepped over to the grave. "Pretty safe to assume. Could be from the Seneca or Cayuga tribe. This was the border between the two." He lifted crime scene tape and bent down to peer inside the mound where Blaylock had collapsed the roof. "It fits a typical Iroquois burial chamber, from what I've read." He pointed out to Rae the distinct structure of an ancient Iroquois gravesite. There was an outer frame made of bark — now rotted and covered in moss, an inner box or coffin-like chamber made of warped wooden planks, and then the actual body itself, wrapped in heavy cloth and skins and placed in a sitting position against a rock. Jake stood up. "I'm no archaeologist but..." The biting morning breeze sent a true shiver through his body. "From a historian's perspective this is one amazing discovery. Keep in mind this is a sacred site too. It's already been desecrated. Technically, it belongs to the Iroquois. You are going to inform them, right?"

"Technically, this site belongs to the land owner, a Mennonite farmer named Martin. But yes, I intend to contact the proper Iroquois authorities. I've never come across anything like this before. I mean a corpse this *old*. By law I have to consider this a crime scene, but the case is pretty well closed. So, I do want to contact the right group and get this off my shoulders. I'm honestly not sure who I should call first. Was wondering if you could offer some guidance."

"I charge by the hour but will cut you a deal over dinner and a fine bottle of Finger Lakes Riesling?" Jake offered.

Rae rolled her eyes. "Negative, Major."

"Wow, it sure is frigid out here."

Rae paused then looked down, reconsidering. "Tell you what. You're cold and you stink. Head over to our Troop E Romulus station. It's just on the other side of the Depot, near the old Army Airfield off 96A south of Kendaia. There are locker rooms for fire and police trainees where you can get cleaned up. Then I'll get your official statement."

"You're right, I do need to shower before our date tonight," Jake answered with a sly, gleaming smile.

"Cut the crap," she replied with stern lips. "This is business. See you in a few."

"Okay then," said Jake. "Since you operate by the book I do have one request in return for my expertise."

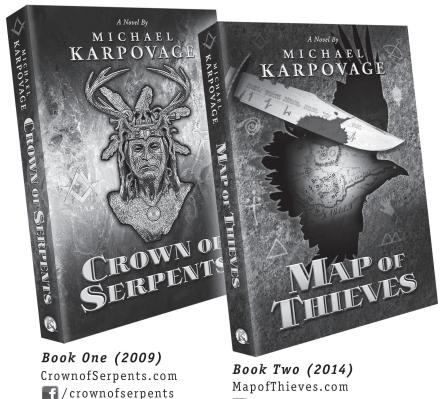
"Shoot."

"I want a picture of that silver broach that Blaylock stole. It has some very strange symbolism on it I'd like to do some research on."

"I'll think about it back at the station," said Rae, stepping into the swamp. "And please don't try rescuing anyone on your way over." I hope you've enjoyed the first three chapters of CROWN OF SERPENTS and are hooked. To learn the rest of the story, purchase the book at CrownofSerpents.com or Amazon.

Be sure to share this FREE PDF with other mystery lovers, too. And if you're on Facebook, visit our page HERE and do give us a LIKE. —Michael Karpovage

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"Karpovage crafts a story rich in intrigue, history, folklore, and the mystery of the white deer. His myriad of subplots and personalities keeps the reader entranced and on edge, begging for more."

- Dennis Money, Chairman, Seneca White Deer, Inc.

With the discovery of a campaign journal from an American Revolutionary War officer who fought against the Iroquois Indians, the U.S. Army calls in their top field historian to assess its contents. Jake Tununda, combat vet, Freemason, and half-Seneca Indian, is stunned when he gleans from the journal's cryptic Masonic passages clues to the location of an ancient shaman's crown once protected by the White Deer Society, a secret cult of his forefathers.

Jake soon realizes why his ancestors' history was best kept buried. And why peaceful, rural central New York's Finger Lakes region can be deadlier than any battlefield he had ever faced.

Crown of Serpents, a mystery thriller set in the former heartland of the Iroquois Empire, takes Jake on a fast-paced hunt to find the elusive crown — and protect it. He teams up with Rae Hart, an alluring state police investigator, as they snake their way across a politically turbulent landscape marked with murder, arson, lies, and deceit. Deciphering Masonic codes, digging up war loot, and fending off the henchmen of billionaire Alex Nero, a ruthless Indian casino magnate, Jake and Rae's survival skills are put to the test. The clues to the crown ultimately lead them deep within sacred Indian caves hidden under the abandoned Seneca Army Depot where the magnitude of the crown's power is revealed.



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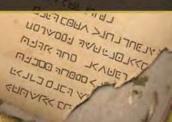
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Crown of Serpents author Michael Karpovage is a native of New York and a graduate of Rochester Institute of Technology. Michael has worked in the design and marketing field for over twenty years as an art director and map illustrator. He is a Freemason and lives in Atlanta, Georgia. *Flashpoint Quebec*, a military techno-thriller, was his first novel.

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