

Whispers in the Dark

by Kris Bock

Chapter 1

What had I gotten myself into?

I closed my eyes. Yes, I was driving, but a moment of distraction seemed safe enough, since I hadn't seen another car in half an hour. Even the jackrabbits and rattlesnakes were hiding in the shade, leaving the road clear of everything but rocks and ruts.

I was starting an adventure. I had to remind myself of that—an adventure. I wanted to be here. I wanted to get away from the city, the classroom and office, the people. You couldn't get much farther away than this, a tiny cluster of seven-hundred-year-old ruins in the Four Corners area of the Southwest. I had found the middle of nowhere.

As I had wanted, I reminded myself.

The car bumped into a pothole and my head smacked back on the headrest. Maybe I needed to pay more attention to the road after all. I had almost gotten used to the constant vibration from the rough dirt track, but I still got an occasional surprise from potholes as big as wading pools and ridges the size of speed bumps.

The vast landscape drew my attention, the open space leaving me a bit breathless, a reverse of claustrophobia. At a glance the scene lacked color, a wash of parched tan that spoke of emptiness, drought, death. I clenched the steering wheel and breathed deeply through my nose to filter out the dust pouring through the open window. I'd shut off the air-conditioning hours ago to keep my wreck from overheating.

It wasn't like I'd have to live in this dusty wasteland forever. I wanted to test myself in unfamiliar terrain, face life head-on, and prove I had healed. Then I could go back to normal life, stronger and ready to face more ordinary challenges. I didn't have to love it here; I only had to survive.

But my eyes, adapted to New England's green trees and grass, slowly started to appreciate this different palette. A painter probably could have named a dozen shades of brown, along with the soft reds—gentle shades of pink and orange and rust and purple—from the sandstone mesas. The scant vegetation added muted, dusty green. The rare patch of yellow wildflowers looked shockingly bright. And above it all lay the vast sky, incredibly blue and so bright it hurt my eyes to look up, even with sunglasses.

I gave a low whistle. "You're not in Boston anymore."

I saw a bump on the horizon, a tan cube that stood out against the undulating mesas only because of its straight lines and sharp angles. I took a quick breath and felt my heart rate speed. Almost there. I turned on the car radio, hoping for some distraction. The "seek" button scanned

for five seconds before finally settling on a crackly voice. It sounded like a news program, something on tourists being careful about carjackings.

I had to smile. This, a bad neighborhood? Maybe for the mice.

I glanced around at the empty landscape. A black speck in the distant sky caught my eye, a hawk soaring in lazy circles. I shivered. I knew what it was like to be the mouse, helpless in a predator's claws.

But not here. I refused to be the mouse out here.

I tossed my head to shake away the thoughts. I was an adult, twenty-four years old, very nearly a professional woman. I had survived two years living in one of the rougher parts of Boston—I ruthlessly pushed down the worst of the memories—so I could certainly handle a few months in the desert.

I blamed the churning in my stomach on the spicy food from lunch and turned up the short drive to the visitors center.

I had my choice of a dozen empty parking spots. I only saw one other vehicle, an aging pickup pulled around the side of the building. I spent a minute brushing my hair and pulling it into a ponytail, then slathered on lip balm. A glance in the rearview mirror told me that nothing but a long shower would make up for the dust and sweat turning my brown hair muddy against skin a little too pink from the short hike I'd taken as a break from the drive the day before.

I wasn't likely to get a shower for a while, but fortunately people expected archeologists to look grungy. Maybe today I'd avoid the raised eyebrows because I looked too young to be a real archaeologist.

I couldn't think of another excuse for dawdling, so I took a deep breath and stepped from the car.

The heat hit me like a physical blow. I'd heard an earlier weather report of 94 degrees, but my mind hadn't quite grasped the number. Sure, it was a dry heat—like an oven. I swayed for a moment and the building in front of me seemed to shimmer. I shook my head and crossed the few paces to the door. I hesitated on the threshold, my hand on the door handle. The building wasn't much bigger than my apartment back in Boston, so why did I feel like I was entering a portal to another dimension?

Maybe because I was entering a different world.

"You wanted this," I muttered. "Now take it and make it yours."

I drew in a deep breath, stretched up to my full five feet two inches, ignored my racing pulse, and pushed open the door.

I took off my sunglasses and blinked as my eyes adjusted to the dim interior. Two steps in, a counter cut the room in half. A closed door behind the counter suggested a back room. A

man stood behind the counter, tall, stocky, and with a bit of a paunch. He looked just like a park ranger should, with brown hair and a bushy beard. He belonged in an Alaskan rainforest, though. He would look more at home in flannel than the green T-shirt he wore.

He smiled briefly, but his gaze dropped to the counter and he didn't speak.

I stepped forward. "Hello. I'm Kiley Hafford, the archaeologist." I didn't bother to add "student." After my work here allowed me to finish my master's thesis, I could claim the title, so why not start practicing now?

His gaze shot up at me and then dropped again. "You—you're early."

"Yes. I gave myself a week to drive from Boston, but things went so well it only took five days."

He didn't answer, just glanced around as if searching for help.

Would this be a bigger deal than I'd expected? I clenched my jaw to keep from apologizing. When he looked at me again I forced myself to smile and said, "I hope it's not a problem."

"N-n-no. It's fine. I'm—I'm J-Jerry."

My mouth dropped open at his terrible stutter. Fortunately, he was staring down at his hands so he didn't see my surprise. No wonder he seemed so shy and nervous. I had to admire his courage for even taking a job like this, which put him in constant contact with tourists.

I held out my hand and said warmly, "I'm pleased to meet you."

He shook my hand and gave me a shy smile. "W-what do you want to do first?"

I glanced at my watch. Five o'clock. "I have time to look around the site before it gets dark, don't I? And you have a camping spot for me?" When he nodded to the questions, I added, "I wouldn't mind cleaning up a bit. There's water at the campground, right?" I realized I was asking only yes or no questions to take the pressure off him. I hoped he didn't notice and think I was being condescending.

"Yes, but—" He waved me around the counter and opened the door. I went through to a small room with a sofa, card table, miniature refrigerator, and stacks of boxes. Jerry pointed to another door and I found a tiny bathroom.

When I'd finished freshening up, I joined Jerry back at the counter. He gave me a tourist trail guide to the national monument and pointed out the ruins where I'd be working. He also gave me a pass to campsite 12 and let me know with a few words and some hand gestures that it was the best, large and set away from the others.

"Will you be able to show me around tomorrow, if I need any help?" I asked.

Jerry shook his head again, “D-d-danesh will do that.”

I suppressed a sigh. Jerry was all right, but who was this Danesh, if I’d heard the name right? What kind of name was it, anyway—male or female? I hoped for a woman but it seemed weird to ask.

“B-be careful at night,” Jerry said. “St-stay in camp.”

I frowned. “Why?” When he didn’t answer, I asked, “Are there wild animals to worry about?”

It took him some time to get out the word no, and add, “Just safer.” Again he seemed to search the room for help. I didn’t want to force him to talk, so I said, “All right, I’ll be careful.” Probably they were used to tourists getting lost or something.

I thanked Jerry and headed for my car. Overall, I thought I’d handled the encounter fairly well. I thought I’d come across as friendly and confident, in charge even. And if my pulse was still jumping, no one could tell.

I drove the short distance to the campground and found space 12. Only a few other spaces were full; obviously this site didn’t get the crowds of Chaco Canyon or Mesa Verde. All the better for me. Each site had a picnic table and a flat spot for a tent, surrounded by low scrub and trees. The campground even had a bathroom with flush toilets and sinks, but no showers. A pump outside the bathroom provided drinking water.

I put up my tent, a bright blue nylon dome supported by flexible metal poles. I tossed my sleeping bag and pad inside to help weight the tent against wind. Then I remembered the radio warning about thefts. Should I lock everything in my car when I was away from the campground? Taking the tent down and putting it up each day would be inconvenient, though, and maybe just encourage someone to break into the car.

Surely crime wasn’t a problem out here. The radio was probably talking about spots in town, like museum parking lots. I’d have to ask Jerry in the morning, or the mysterious Danesh. Until then, I’d take my chances.

My watch said 5:40, and the sun was well above the horizon. I had enough time for a hike around the canyon. The map said the Towers Loop was only a mile long. I changed from shorts into sturdy tan pants, for protection against ticks and sharp brush, and tucked the cuffs into my hiking boots. I grabbed the map and filled a bottle of water, then started walking.

On my way out of the campground, I passed a small RV behind a sign that said “Hosts.” An old couple sat at the picnic table beside it. The man stayed bent over his newspaper, but the woman looked up, and I waved. She waved back and called out in a surprisingly low, gravelly voice, “You going to the ruins now? Don’t be out too long. Once it gets dark, you could get lost or twist your ankle.”

“I’ll be careful.” I kept moving, not wanting to get stuck in a conversation. I figured I had several hours of daylight. I hadn’t taken the time to properly outfit a backpack with a first aid kit

and flashlight, but I was just planning to do a short walk on a trail designed for elderly tourists like those two.

I hurried along the trail until I reached the canyon rim, where I stopped and grinned. The canyon cut across the land in front of me—maybe more of a ravine, really, several miles long but only a quarter-mile across and a few hundred feet deep. The bottom looked shady and cool, while the sun lit up the small ruin to my right.

The now-roofless mud-brick structure wouldn't impress anyone but an archaeologist—except for the way it perched recklessly atop a thirty-foot boulder. The boulder sloped at a sharp angle, so it looked like the whole structure should slide into the canyon. And it had been there for over 700 years! I skimmed the pamphlet and confirmed what I remembered: Stronghold House was part of a large pueblo that once filled the canyon slope below. Ironically, the lower floors built down in the canyon had crumbled and been washed away, so now only the top story remained, safe on the enormous boulder.

I spotted carved hand and toeholds in the rock, leading up to the low doorway. I tried to imagine the Anasazi living there centuries before, scrambling up the steep side of the boulder as easily as I walked up the stairs to my second-floor apartment. I half-closed my eyes to blur my vision and tried to picture the way it must have been before the walls crumbled and the roof collapsed. I imagined small, tanned people in loincloths, women on the roof, crouched over their work, children playing nearby, men returning from hunting or working their cultivated fields. I could almost hear their cheerful shouts.

I opened my eyes and turned down the path along the canyon rim, humming with pleasure.

The next structure, called Falling House, looked even less accessible. It clung to a rugged outcropping of rock separated from the canyon rim by a five-foot crevasse, as if a piece of the canyon wall had peeled away but stopped short of falling. Several ruined walls still stood, the jagged line of their crumbled tops silhouetted against the blue sky. A diagram in the pamphlet showed several rooms and a round kiva or ceremonial room.

I couldn't wait to explore further. Of course, regular tourists weren't allowed to leave the trail, but one of the perks of being an archaeologist was special access. For the next few weeks, this would be my playground.

The next site on the map was just a vandalized rock shelter, and the trail guide complained that people had torn down the walls before it could be excavated. Only part of one wall and a jumble of stones remained. But the guide also mentioned that the site might have yielded storage jars or food remains, had it been left for archaeologists. Since my interest was ancient food, I decided to creep down for a closer look.

I moved carefully, so as not to disturb the loose rocks, and squatted near the biggest pile of rubble. I gently lifted a few pieces of broken brick, putting them back in the same place after I'd examined them. I couldn't do much with the fragments, but as always, I marveled over touching something from the past.

Tomorrow would be soon enough for scientific method, for testing and hypothesizing. Tonight I only wanted to touch the magic of this ancient world. I closed my eyes and tried to feel some ancient presence, to hear whispers from the past. The air seemed to tremble with possibilities. If only I believed in magic—

A shout slashed the air. I twisted so fast I tumbled onto my backside.

I gaped up at the man towering over me. Bare chest, muscular and bronzed. Black hair pulled back from a face full of sharp planes and angles. Dark eyes fierce under scowling brows.

My heart jolted painfully. I'd come face to face with an ancient warrior. He was gorgeous.

And furious.

At me.

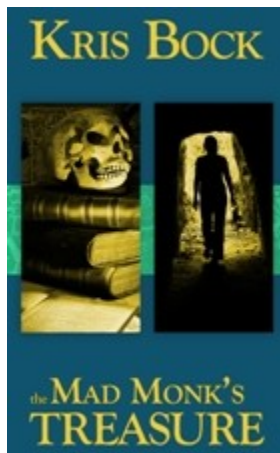
About the Author

Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Adventures

Kris Bock writes novels of suspense and romance with outdoor adventures and Southwestern landscapes. *The Mad Monk's Treasure* follows the hunt for a long-lost treasure in the New Mexico desert. In *The Dead Man's Treasure*, estranged relatives compete to reach a buried treasure by following a series of complex clues. In *The Skeleton Canyon Treasure*, sparks fly when reader favorites Camie and Tiger help a mysterious man track down his missing uncle. *Whispers in the Dark* features archaeology and intrigue among ancient Southwest ruins. *What We Found* is a mystery with strong romantic elements about a young woman who finds a murder victim in the woods. In *Counterfeits*, stolen Rembrandt paintings bring danger to a small New Mexico town.

Read excerpts at www.krisbock.com or visit her [Amazon page](#). [Sign up for Kris Bock newsletter](#) for announcements of new books, sales, and more.

The Mad Monk's Treasure is the first of the Southwest Treasure Hunters novels. *The Dead Man's Treasure* is book 2 and *The Skeleton Canyon Treasure* is book 3. Each novel stands alone and is complete, with no cliffhangers. This series mixes action and adventure with sweet romance. The stories explore the Southwest, especially New Mexico.



The Mad Monk's Treasure

The lost Victorio Peak treasure is the stuff of legends—a heretic Spanish priest's gold mine, made richer by the spoils of bandits and an Apache raider. When Erin, a quiet history professor, uncovers a clue that may pinpoint the lost treasure cave, she prepares for adventure. But when a hit and run driver nearly kills her, she realizes she's not the only one after the treasure. And is Drew, the handsome helicopter pilot who found her bleeding in a ditch, really a hero, or one of the enemy?

Erin isn't sure she can trust Drew with her heart, but she'll need his help to track down the treasure. She heads into the New Mexico wilderness with her brainy best friend Camie and a feisty orange cat. The wilderness holds its own dangers, from wild animals to sudden storms. Plus, the sinister men hunting Erin are determined to follow her all the way to the treasure, no matter where the twisted trail leads. Erin won't give up an important historical find without a fight, but is she ready to risk her life—and her heart?

“The story has it all - action, romance, danger, intrigue, lost treasure, not to mention a sizzling relationship....”

“Great balance of history, romance, and adventure. Smart romance with an “Indiana Jones” feel.”

“Well-written with an attention to detail that allowed me to picture exactly in my head how a scene looked and played out.” - Jules R.



The Dead Man's Treasure

Rebecca Westin is shocked to learn the grandfather she never knew has left her a bona fide buried treasure – but only if she can decipher a complex series of clues leading to it. The hunt would be challenging enough without interference from her half-siblings, who are determined to find the treasure first and keep it for themselves. Good thing Rebecca has recruited some help.

Sam is determined to show Rebecca that a desert adventure can be sexy and fun. But there's a treacherous wildcard in the mix, a man willing to do anything to get that treasure – and revenge.

Action and romance combine in this lively Southwestern adventure, complete with riddles the reader is invited to solve to identify historical and cultural sites around New Mexico.



Counterfeits

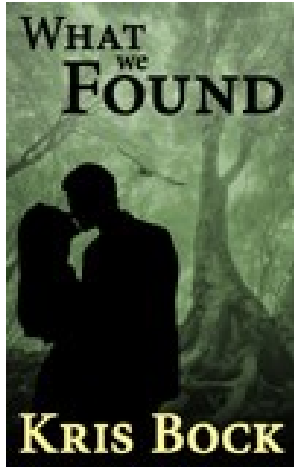
Painter Jenny Kinley has spent the last decade struggling in the New York art world. Her grandmother's sudden death brings her home to New Mexico, but inheriting the children's art camp her grandmother ran is more of a burden than a gift. How can she give up her lifelong dreams of showing her work in galleries and museums?

Rob Caruso, the camp cook and all-around handyman, would be happy to run the camp with Jenny. Dare he even dream of that, when his past holds dark secrets that he can never share? When Jenny's father reappears after a decade-long absence, only Rob knows where he's been and what danger he's brought with him.

Jenny and Rob face midnight break-ins and make desperate escapes, but the biggest danger may come from the secrets that don't want to stay buried. In the end, they must decide whether their dreams will bring them together or force them apart.

Praise for *Counterfeits*:

“‘Counterfeits’ is the kind of romantic suspense novel I have enjoyed since I first read Mary Stewart’s ‘Moonspinners’, and Kris Bock used all the things I love about this genre. Appealing lead characters, careful development of the mysterious danger facing one or both of those characters, a great location that is virtually a character on its own, interesting secondary characters who might or might not be involved or threatened, and many surprises building up to the climax.” 5 Stars – Roberta at Sensuous Reviews blog



What We Found

22-year-old Audra Needham is back in her small New Mexico hometown. She just wants to fit in, work hard, and help her younger brother. Going for a walk in the woods with her former crush, Jay, is a harmless distraction.

Until they stumble on a body.

Jay, who has secrets of his own to protect, insists they walk away and keep quiet. But Audra can't forget what she's seen. The woman deserves to be found, and her story deserves to be told.

More than one person isn't happy about Audra bringing a crime to life.

The dead woman was murdered, and Audra could be next on the vengeful killer's list. She'll have to stand up for herself in order to stand

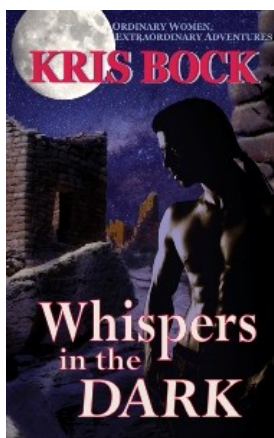
up for the murder victim. It's a risk, and so is reaching out to the mysterious young man who works with deadly birds of prey. With her 12-year-old brother determined to play detective, and romance budding in the last place she expected, Audra learns that some risks are worth taking – no matter the danger, to her body or her heart.

Praise for *What We Found*:

“Another action-packed suspense novel by Kris Bock, perhaps her best to date. The author weaves an intriguing tale with appealing characters. Watching Audra, the main character, evolve into an emotionally-mature and independent young woman is gratifying.”

“This book had me guessing to the end who was the murderer. Well written characters drive the story. Good romance. Exceptional and believable plot twists and turns. I loved it!”

“This is a nonstop suspense. Love the characters and how real they seem with every episode played out. This is a love story and suspense all in one.”



Whispers in the Dark

Young archeologist Kylie Hafford heads to the remote Puebloan ruins of Lost Valley, Colorado, to excavate. Her first exploration of the crumbling ruins ends in a confrontation with a gorgeous, angry man who looks like a warrior from the Pueblo's ancient past. If only Danesh weren't so aggravating... and fascinating. Then she literally stumbles across Sean, a charming, playful tourist. His attentions feel safer, until she glimpses secrets he'd rather keep hidden.

The summer heats up as two sexy men pursue her. She finds mysteries – and surprising friendships – among the other campground residents.

Could the wide-eyed woman and her silent children be in the kind of

danger all too familiar to Kylie?

Mysterious lights, murmuring voices, and equipment gone missing plague her dig. A midnight encounter sends Kylie plummeting into a deep canyon. She'll need all her strength and wits to

survive. Everything becomes clear – if she wants to save the man she’s come to love and see the villains brought to justice, she must face her demons and fight.

Whispers in the Dark is action-packed romantic suspense set in the Four Corners region of the Southwest.

Praise for *Whispers in the Dark*:

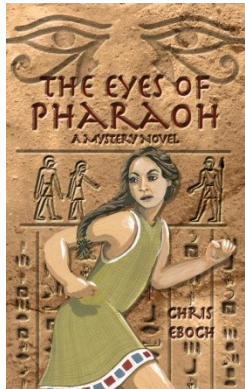
“This book was a delight from start to finish!”

“Whispers in the Dark has a hefty dose of adventure and mystery, as well as a strong main character.”

“This book kept me turning pages until the end. The plot was full of twists and turns, always keeping the reader rooting for the heroine. Excellent read!”

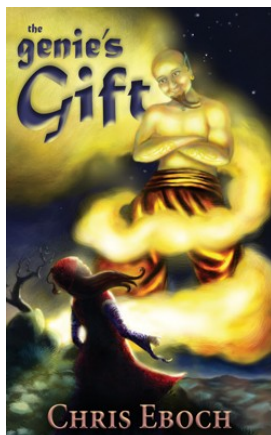
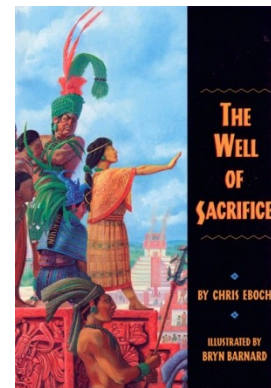
Children's books by Chris Eboch

Ms. Bock also writes for young people as Chris Eboch. Her novels are appropriate for ages nine and up. Learn more or read excerpts at www.chriseboch.com or Chris's [Amazon page](#). Sign up for the [Chris Eboch children's books](#) mailing list for special offers and new releases.



The Eyes of Pharaoh, a mystery set in Egypt in 1177 BC, brings an ancient world to life. When Reya hints that Egypt is in danger from foreign nomads, Seshta and Horus don't take him seriously. How could anyone challenge Egypt? Then Reya disappears. To save their friend, Seshta and Horus spy on merchants, soldiers, and royalty, and start to suspect even The Eyes of Pharaoh, the powerful head of the secret police. Will Seshta and Horus escape the traps set for them, rescue Reya, and stop the plot against Egypt in time?

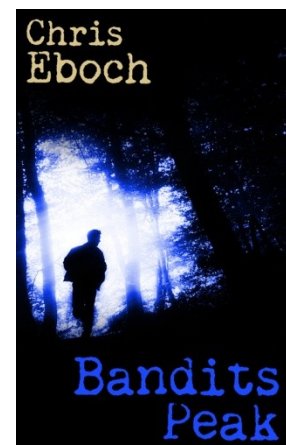
In *The Well of Sacrifice*, a Mayan girl in ninth-century Guatemala rebels against the High Priest who sacrifices anyone challenging his power. Kirkus Reviews said, "[An] engrossing first novel.... Eboch crafts an exciting narrative with a richly textured depiction of ancient Mayan society.... The novel shines not only for a faithful recreation of an unfamiliar, ancient world, but also for the introduction of a brave, likable and determined heroine."

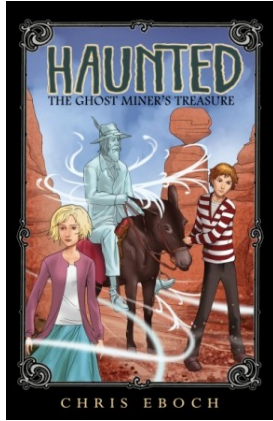


The Genie's Gift is a lighthearted action novel that draws on the mythology of The Arabian Nights. Shy and timid Anise determines to find the Genie Shakayak and claim the Gift of Sweet Speech. But the way is barred by a series of challenges, both ordinary and magical. How will Anise get past a vicious she-ghoul, a sorceress who turns people to stone, and mysterious sea monsters, when she can't even speak in front of strangers?

Bandits Peak: While hiking in the mountains, Jesse meets a strange trio. He befriends Maria, but he's suspicious of the men with her. Still, charmed by Maria, Jesse promises not to tell anyone that he met them. But his new friends have deadly secrets, and Jesse uncovers them. It will take all his wilderness skills, and all his courage, to survive.

Readers who enjoyed Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* will love *Bandits Peak*. This heart-pounding adventure tale is full of danger and excitement.





The *Haunted* series follows a brother and sister who travel with their parents' ghost hunter TV show and try to help the ghosts. In *The Ghost on the Stairs*, an 1880s ghost bride haunts a Colorado hotel, waiting for her missing husband to return. *The Riverboat Phantom* features a steamboat pilot still trying to prevent a long-ago disaster. In *The Knight in the Shadows*, a Renaissance French squire protects a sword on display at a New York City museum. During *The Ghost Miner's Treasure*, Jon and Tania help a dead man find his lost gold mine—but they're not the only ones looking for it.

Learn more or read excerpts at www.chriseboch.com or Chris's [Amazon page](#). Sign up for the [Chris Eboch children's books](#) mailing list for special offers and new releases.

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