

The background is a painting of a desert landscape at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. In the foreground, a large, dark rock sits on the ground, covered in white graffiti. The graffiti is mostly illegible but includes words like 'LOVE', 'HATE', 'LIFE', 'DEATH', 'WAR', 'PEACE', 'TRUTH', 'LIES', 'GOOD', 'BAD', 'MAY', 'BE', 'THE', 'BEST', 'OF', 'US', 'AND', 'THE', 'WORST', 'OF', 'THEM'. The rest of the landscape features rolling hills, a large green bush, and a small rock in the distance.

# DECALOGUE DECEPTION

DAVID DUBCZAK

# Author's Note

After writing this story, I found myself conflicted about whether I should publish. I first heard of the Los Lunas Decalogue Stone on a third-rate History Channel documentary when I was in middle school. Their historical carelessness notwithstanding, the story has stuck with me ever since. When I decided to write a novel, I started researching unsolved historical mysteries. Among the items in my search, I found the story of missing artifacts from the Museum of the American Indian. Combining that with the legend of the Decalogue Stone, the first nugget of a story was born.

However, including stories of the Cherokee and other indigenous people had me conflicted. I am not Cherokee. How would this be perceived? It wasn't enough simply to conduct book research; I had to talk to and meet with members of the Cherokee Nation to help with research and decision-making. Half the people I talked to were not supportive, the other half thought this was a story worth being told. All-in-all, a result not helpful in my decision-making.

In the end, I decided to publish. This is a work of fiction. If reading this book causes anyone to seek out more learning on the indigenous people *from their perspective*, to read about the Trail of Tears *from their perspective*, or about the smallpox epidemic that destroyed their population *from their perspective*, it's a net positive. That's what I did while writing this book. I hope it will drive you to do the same. Given the story's central theory: the temple treasures smuggled to the Americas, leaving out the indigenous people just to play it safe would be a worse sin.

This story, overall, is a story of peace and co-existence. The more one hears those types of stories, the more likely they are to seek such a world for themselves. *That* is why I wrote this work.

Every story needs a villain. The villain represents views opposite of the hero and the overall theme of the story. This story represents the villain, though Cherokee, as an outcast whose views and practices are not respected by the wider Cherokee people. Seek out *those* people, and learn from *their* views and practices, not the views of this villain.

In the end, we all inhabit this planet. As one character in this book reminds the protagonist, “We are all connected. What hurts you, hurts me.” In your own internal battle between the good wolf and the bad wolf, feed the good wolf.

## Acknowledgements

Perhaps someday, I will have a giant publisher’s army of researchers, fact-checkers, and contacts.

For now, I’m grateful for the real Joe (whose name in no way inspired this story’s villain), who graciously volunteered his time to talk with me about his family history and life in the Cherokee Nation.

I’m also grateful to my wife, Laura, who took the first pass of editing this book, and also sat patiently while I rambled off random plot lines for nearly a year.

I also gleaned insight as to the thoughts and feelings one gets working at the Smithsonian from my own stint working at the institution years ago. Thank you to those who welcomed me, from the director level to the archives.

# Facts

In 1650, Dutch Rabbi Menashe Ben Israel recorded notes on a conversation he had with a Dutch Jewish sea captain. This captain and his mate made landfall in the Americas and tried to communicate with the native people in every European language they could speak, with no success.

When he and the mate expressed frustration in Hebrew, the Native American chief responded by speaking Hebrew back to them.

In 1880, a New Mexico farmer discovered the Ten Commandments written on a giant stone in Phoenician Hebrew, a Middle Eastern language not spoken in nearly 2000 years.

In 1989, the Smithsonian acquired the collection of George G. Heye, a collection of more than 800,000 Native American artifacts. Thousands of objects were missing when the collection was acquired, and remain missing to this day.

# Chapter 1

Real archeology isn't like Indiana Jones, but Vivian Guthrie found herself on a wild chase through the desert.

Real archeology isn't like Indiana Jones, but Vivian Guthrie found herself in a race to keep a powerful relic away from the bad guys.

Real archeology isn't like Indiana Jones, but Vivian Guthrie found herself tied to a post, bloodied by the villain.

And Vivian Guthrie isn't an archeologist. She's the director of a museum. *The* museum. The Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

And somehow, she rose to the top without revealing her secret.

But today, it's her secret that has her tied to a post. It's her secret that has her bloodied. It's her secret that led her, no, *drove* her into the desert.

Secrets have a way of doing that to you: sneaking up on you. They're planted as a small seed, but it's not the growing that causes problems. It's when they bloom.

Blooming is what makes people look. Blooming attracts bugs, and pests. A plant can't bloom without being cultivated, and Vivian certainly was a master at cultivating this garden of lies.

As the director of the museum, Dr. Vivian Guthrie, Ph.D., had grown more accustomed to wearing a pantsuit than having her silver hair tied up under a safari hat, wearing khakis and boots trekking through the New Mexico desert. But secrets have a way of changing you.

By day, she runs her museum. By night, her secret runs her.

And today, it ran her into the New Mexico desert. A man, a physical manifestation of her secret, had her beaten and tied to a post in the blazing sun of New Mexico at noon.

This isn't a surprise to her, but a latent feeling finally made real:

Her secret's out.

## Chapter 2

Two Weeks Earlier

"He's still looking at you!" Tia leaned over next to Vivian and barely whispered, hoping her desire for the interaction to be flirtatious would actually make it so. "He's been looking at you all night!"

The grand rotunda of the Museum of American History towered four stories, and, unlike most rooms described as a "rotunda," was actually square. A "square-tunda?" Is that a word? "Squatunda?" "Squanda?" Atrium. Yes, *atrium*. That's the word she was looking for. White marble panels line the walls, and tonight, allowed hundreds of voices to echo across this modern cavern.

Then the voices came to a hush. Some lights dimmed, while others illuminated the temporary stage erected below the artistic stainless steel American flag that decorated the *atrium*. In the room were about a hundred dignitaries of the museum - the board of trustees, benefactors, department heads - and they were all there for one reason: Vivian.

"He's still looking at you!"

Itotia Diaz was Vivian's friend of over fifteen years. They say opposites attract, and it was certainly true in

their case. Where Vivian was calm, Tia compulsively danced about her space. Where Vivian cared little for makeup or fancy hairstyles, Tia never left her bedroom unprepared for the glamor magazine photographer she not-so-secretly wished would someday drop through the skylight in her apartment. Where Vivian valued being reserved and measured in her choice of words, Tia never left you wondering what she was thinking (although you frequently wondered *why* she could possibly be thinking it).

Where Vivian had never been married, Tia's ex-husbands could field a baseball team, but were probably better suited for manning the back of a Five Guys joint.

"He's still looking at you!"

Vivian shushed Tia as the presentation was about to begin. Walking up the stairs to the stage was Oskar Nilsen, the silver-haired, dark-glassioed, immaculately tuxedoed president of the museum's board of directors. His hair held the shape of a high school prom king's, and the color of a wizard's. He wasn't that much taller than average, but his demeanor commanded your silence.

"He's been looking at you all night, Viv!" Tia teased, nudging her on the shoulder. "You should talk to him!"

"While Oskar is talking?" Vivian asked, with no intention of talking to the man, no matter Tia's answer.

Vivian was a firm believer that people give off energy, and the man across the room was not giving her an energy that made her feel welcome. It was dark, almost sour. From across the room, the man sat in a jet-black suit that matched the long, slick hair he kept in a

ponytail. Black jacket, black shirt, no tie. He had a chiseled face, and dark eyes.

Eyes that were indeed staring at her, the same way a fighter jet locks onto its target from across the horizon.

Vivian waved over an assistant as Oskar began talking from the stage.

“My first encounter with Doctor Guthrie was actually at a banquet much like this one, and on her first day of work right here at this museum, almost thirty years ago,” Oskar spoke without reading from script or teleprompter, demonstrating one of his several god-like abilities to the museum staff.

The assistant made it to Vivian’s table and leaned in to inquire as to why she was interrupting Oskar at her own banquet.

“Find out who that is, sitting at table seven, in the black jacket,” Vivian instructed, as Oskar’s voice echoed off the walls in the background.

“At a banquet much like this. The way I like to tell the story, we met while introducing ourselves after the dinner, and engaged in a lively fifteen-minute discussion on cartography.” The audience chuckled. “The way *she* likes to tell it, she was minding her own business when some strange middle-aged man came over and droned about maps for three hours.”

The audience genuinely laughed. “Only three?” Vivian shouted over the laughter. Tia hit her, as Vivian glanced toward the back of the room to see the assistant combing through a clipboard and trying to hide that she was glancing toward table seven.

And still, the dark man’s eyes were unsettling. As Vivian tried not to notice, she vaguely heard Oskar talk about the museum’s mission, the purpose of the



Smithsonian being “the increase and diffusion of knowledge,” and something about youth programming and raising the next generation of historical thinkers. The assistant came back to the table.

“His name is Joe Sitting Crow,” she said.

“Never heard of him.” *Why is he here?* Is what Vivian implied.

The assistant understood. “I’ll find out who invited him,” she said, and then took off again.

Vivian knew this room. Rich donors to the museum, board members, and department heads. As the museum’s director, she knew all the rich donors, board members, and department heads, and Joe Sitting Crow was none of those things. He just sat there, motionless and staring, with the energy of a lion stalking its prey, but a patient one, who knew he need not act until the time was perfect. The rest of table seven leisurely paid attention to Oskar’ speech, but Joe Sitting Crow stared straight ahead.

They made eye contact, just briefly. Sitting Crow slowly nodded his head, which made it even worse. Vivian made a semi-polite smile to hide the small shiver that just jolted her and directed her attention back to Oskar.

“And she’s a prolific fundraiser. I can personally attest to the fact that my bank account would be much larger if Doctor Guthrie wasn’t here trying to raise money,” Oskar joked again, and the crowd dutifully responded with a kind chuckle, even the rich donors in a similar situation to Oskar.

Yes, collectively laughing at losing lots of money. The social duty of multi-millionaires.

Sparkles of light reflected off the decorative silver American flag above Oskar as he closed his speech. “In the thirty years I’ve known her, I’ve found her to be not only a talented historian, effective administrator, and gifted forward-thinker, but also a good and loyal friend. On behalf of the board, it is my honor to introduce to you the new director of this museum, one of your own: Doctor Vivian Guthrie!”

The room broke into applause and jumped to their feet with cheers. For the first time, even Joe Sitting Crow broke his trance and joined the applause as well. Tia hit Vivian. “Get up there, nerd!” she said.

Vivian politely put down her napkin, pushed in her chair, and with all the poise of a ballet dancer, headed toward the stage. The most direct path to the stage took her right past table seven.

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Her speech was over, and it was thankfully short. She gave the usual platitudes about what an honor it was to be promoted into this position, and how she works for her staff and for the visitors. “These are America’s treasures,” she said, to close her speech, “and whether you’re a citizen or an honored guest, they’re free for everyone to see.”

The atrium erupted into applause, both because the speeches were over and because it was time to drink champagne and mingle. Vivian never understood mingling - she adapted to it as a necessity of her job, but mentally, she just wanted to go home and lay on her couch with a good book.

Her secret was making it hard for her to concentrate on books lately. Having this particular secret *and* being the director of the museum required her to be, well, careful. What few age lines graced her face were unfortunately from the stress of hiding her secret, not working out in the field performing historical dirty work.

And here, at the banquet, was Joe Sitting Crow. They had to be connected. Somehow.

The small jazz band played and the crowd mingled, and Vivian thought it was quite superfluous for a promotion. *Just give her the keys to her office and let everyone keep doing their thing* is what she wanted. But she understood: being the director of the museum meant keeping your benefactors happy, and multi-millionaires relish these types of parties.

These parties are exclusive, invitation-only events. Getting an invitation requires you to have parted ways with hundreds of thousands of dollars. Then the museum says “Thank you!” by throwing glitzy parties and inviting you. If you’ve spent over a million, the museum will show you they’re using your money wisely by delivering your invitation with its own car and driver.

Being at these parties shows that you’re rich. They’re really a courtesy, a service performed for the donors.

And with that, her attention turned back to Joe Sitting Crow. There was only one way to get invited to this party. So, why didn’t she know him? And what was up with that sour vibe? She looked across the room, champagne glass in hand. He no longer stared at her, but stood at a high table, by himself, staring at... something, though she couldn’t tell what.

Tia moseyed up and jostled her so that her champagne almost spilled, disrupting Vivian's focus. "So, you gonna talk to him?" she said, smiling.

The assistant Vivian sent on a detective mission ran back with her report in hand.

"Doctor Guthrie," she got Vivian and Tia's attention. "His name's Joe Sitting Crow. Two days ago, he informed the advancement team he intends to award a quarter-million dollar grant to a museum, and he'd like to be shown around to help make his decision. The advancement team thought it would be a good idea to invite him."

*So he basically bribed his way into this party,* Vivian thought. *Actually, he didn't even bribe yet. Just... um... threatened to bribe.* "Well, he's standing by himself, so someone's not doing a great job of making him feel very welcomed."

Unsure that this was her job, the assistant held her breath. "I can talk to the advancement team?"

Vivian waved her off. "I'll take care of it," she said, and the assistant went on her way.

"Does this mean you're gonna go talk to him?" Tia leaned forward and twirled her hair as she asked.

"Only if you go with me."

A ray of excitement shot through Tia, and she exclaimed with fake frustration, "Well, yes! I've just been waiting for you to ask!"

Like a couple of teenagers approaching a boy at the homecoming dance, Tia and Vivian approached Joe Sitting Crow together.

"Mister Sitting Crow, good of you to come, I hope you enjoyed your dinner," Vivian nodded politely in

millionaire-speak while Tia hid behind her and smiled like she had a crush on him (which she did).

He responded with total, calm focus. “Doctor Guthrie, nice to meet you. Thank you for your invitation.”

“Of course!” *Yes*, she thought, *people do many things in my name without my knowledge*. She wondered exactly how much of that came with the job.

Vivian continued, “This is my friend and colleague, Itotia Diaz.” Tia blushed. Joe’s head cocked with curiosity.

“Itotia. That’s Mayan, if I’m not mistaken.” It was interesting how a man who seemed so threatening could also seem so seriously - but genuinely - interested. His dark eyes suddenly turned, well, *kind*, and he directed his curiosity at Tia with the same fighter jet focus.

“Most people just call me Tia.” Vivian wondered if it was possible to blush harder.

“If you don’t mind,” he replied, quite politely, “Calling you *Itotia* would seem to respect the history of your culture. The history of the Mayans is fascinating.”

It *was* possible to blush harder.

“Could you... um... teach it to me?” Tia twirled an immaculately prepared strand of hair, placed there for the sole purpose of being able to twirl it in the presence of men.

For the first time, Sitting Crow smiled, almost sheepishly. Vivian was glad she brought Tia along. But still, *why was he here?*

“I’ve spent my adult life studying all indigenous cultures,” Sitting Crow said. “Tell me, Itotia, how much do you know about your past?”

Vivian nearly thought Tia had somehow driven the threat from Sitting Crow, but it was the way he asked that

question that made her realize it was still there: he looked directly at Vivian.

“My parents were Mexican,” Tia said, followed by an uncomfortable pause. She broke her own silence. “And you’re an Indian?”

“Cherokee,” he quickly corrected. Vivian sensed, had they not been standing with polite company, his quick correction may have included an unpleasant lesson on the word “Indian,” and she did not desire to experience it.

Vivian broke another awkward silence. “She works in finance,” she chuckled. Tia twirled her hair. Sitting Crow still gave no hint of why he was there.

“If I may, Miss Guthrie, I do have an early meeting in the morning.” He shook her hand, “Congratulations on being appointed director. You’ll be seeing more of me.”

With a polite nod to Tia, he turned, and left.

“Well, shoot, I *always* blow it,” Tia sighed.

“Usually you marry them first,” Vivian said, distracted.

“True, very true.” Tia slumped against the wall and slurped her champagne.

*You’ll be seeing more of me.* That’s how he left the conversation. But why? Why was he there, and how would they be seeing more of each other?

Vivian determined she would enjoy the rest of her evening, but no matter how many smiling millionaires shook her hand, no matter how many department heads gave ideas for new exhibits, and no matter how many photos in which she posed, Joe Sitting Crow occupied her mind.

Somehow, though no longer in the building, he was still staring at her. Why, and what did it have to do with her secret?

She couldn't know yet that tomorrow afternoon would bring a phone call that would make Joe Sitting Crow's intentions clear, and set the next two weeks in motion.

## Chapter 3

At the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, any day has the potential to turn into a bad day.

And any bad day has the potential to turn into a terrible year.

This day was the first day of the worst period in the CDC's history, and no one knew it yet.

It started with an email on John Baker's computer.

From: Christopher Welford  
Subject: I need five minutes  
Label: Urgent

Dr. Welford is the brilliant director of virology at the CDC. His life's work is studying how viruses form, how to kill them, and then how to train human bodies to kill them. His clean-shaven head and face make it difficult to tell his age. For someone working in a clean-suit environment every day, being clean-shaven just made things easier.

John Baker had one year before he could retire. As the chief science officer at the CDC, he is the highest among the center's leaders that isn't appointed by the president. He worked in medical science his entire life and had little patience for politics.

He had little patience for much else anymore, he found. With one year left, his primary project was recommending to the director a new chief science officer, and preparing to make the transition as smooth as possible.

John stood up and stretched his long back, then strolled through his sterile office and poked his narrow face through the door. “Morgan, call Chris and tell him he can come up here any time,” he said, without fully leaving his office.

“You have a button on your phone you could use to tell me that, you know,” his overly-eager secretary joked.

John dropped his head, smiled, and still didn’t leave his office. “An old man like me needs to get up and move.”

“And learn new phone systems,” Morgan smiled in return.

John gave her a friendly wave and returned to his desk. He wasn’t sitting for more than a few moments, scrolling through emails and his daily meeting agendas when Chris Welford burst in through the door. Chris spent his med school years and the first few years of his medical career in the Marines, and that particular style of charging into a room and owning it never left him, nor did his blonde buzz cut or exercise habits.

“Morning, Chris,” John welcomed him with a smile, not leaving his desk.

Chris wasn’t angry, but he was nervous, even antsy. He stayed standing and presented his information to John as if he was the commanding officer. It’s funny the habits you choose to revert to when stressed.

“John, I’m missing a biochemist,” he announced.



“Missing?” John asked, bewildered. “What does that mean?”

Chris exhaled. “A researcher on my team hasn’t shown up for work in a week.” He started pacing.

John cocked his head slightly sideways. This wasn’t a fast-food restaurant where people just quit without notice. This was the CDC. Careers were made here. For many, especially a virologist on Chris’ team, this was one of the few places in the country they *could* work.

“A week? Do you know what’s going on?” He asked.

“A week and a half, actually. Last week, she went to a conference in Kansas City. She just never came back.”

“No phone call? No messages?”

“Nothing.” As a Marine still biased toward action, Chris continued with his report of steps he had already taken. “I already called the conference organizers, and she checked in at the registration table, but there’s no way to verify she took part in any way after that. I called the hotel, and she checked in, but never checked out. They looked at her room, and it’s empty.”

John’s tall and gangly frame could collapse inward on itself if he didn’t sit straight. When perplexing situations draw some people into slouching in their chairs, stress drives John taller. With an exhale, he looked at his desk phone, picked a button, and pressed it.

The phone dinged to life, and Morgan answered on speaker. “Good Job, Mister Baker-”

John interrupted her curtly. “I need someone from HR up here. Now.”

Recognizing he was in no joking mood, Morgan answered seriously, “Yes, right away.” The phone clicked off.

Chris' pacing paused, and he stood at attention. If the guy had stayed in the Marines, he'd be a general by now for sure. "Human Resources?" He questioned.

"They can run her emergency contacts and try to get in touch with the family. Not sure there's much else we can do on our end." John tapped his desk and tried to think of the next best move. "Can you get me a list of her current projects?"

Chris swiftly leaped toward the door. "Stay by your email," he said, exiting in one furious motion.

Alone in the office, John tried to think of all the reasons she could be missing. Car accident? Did she pass away unexpectedly in her hotel? Come to think of it, he didn't even ask her name. He was mostly hoping she had enough documentation on her projects that they could bring in a new biochemist who could get started with the team right away, in the event she wouldn't be returning for whatever reason. Hopefully not horrific.

And if this unnamed biochemist *had* met a tragic end, there wasn't much the CDC could do. Human Resources would ask around, call her emergency contacts, and then her life was in her family's hands. Research at the CDC would continue. Unless she died of some sort of contagious disease, the CDC wouldn't investigate her death.

His email dinged.

From: Christopher Welford  
Subject: Reagan Pierce Caseload  
Label: Urgent

He skimmed through the email, trying to get a sense of the resumé they would need to look for in the

new biochemist to hire. One line in particular stood out. He paused.

At this line, he reached into his desk drawer, grabbed his reading glasses, and fumbled to put them on. He had to make sure he was seeing this correctly.

For one of the few moments in his life, he slouched as the computer screen drew in his face, his eyebrows slowly raising above the line of his glasses.

Just then, a generic-suited thirty-something human resources officer who was about to be way in over his head knocked and opened the door slowly.

“I was told you needed someone from HR right away?” He said, still not fully in the office.

John looked up at him, hiding a look of fear behind his eyes.

“We need to call the FBI.”

## Chapter 4

“Every damn time!”

Harrison Lumley burst into Vivian’s office unannounced, as much as a sixty-year-old historian could. He was thin, not from exercise, but from being too busy to eat and too engaged in his latest mystery to realize he’s hungry.

Vivian’s assistant, Clara, flew in behind him.

“Sorry,” she said, “I couldn’t stop him.”

“You can’t stop me, and you can’t fire me. I have tenure,” Harrison proudly announced.

Vivian pleasantly smiled. “It’s fine, Clara. Harrison, how can I help you? Every damn time, what?”

“That’ll be Doctor Lumley, thank you.”

*Doctor Lumley?* Vivian had known Harrison for over two decades, their skin both pasty from the years spent tanning under the dim lights of the library. They shared a love of history, tracking down artifacts, and a near zero risk of skin cancer. She called him “Doctor Lumley” for a few weeks after he earned his Ph.D, and then he went back to being good old Harrison. What gives?

“What’s happening, Harrison?” She asked as a friend, not as his boss.

*Ping.* A chat request popped up in her email. It was Marvin Pagels, the director of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

Marvin, NMAI: Got a few minutes to video chat?

Harrison cleared his throat as Clara left the room. He gripped the back of the chair across from Vivian’s desk, his shoulder-length locks bouncing with animation as he talked.

“Every time I’m about to track down a document, an artifact, a map, something... every time, it gets swiped out from right underneath me. Sometimes, it’s with a private collector - they entertain me for a few weeks, and then sell their artifact to someone else right before I get final approval.”

The dancing of his hair seemed to defy gravity, and his blood shone through his face’s thin skin.

“And then there are situations like what happened just a few weeks ago. Someone in Boston wants to build a house. As they start digging, they uncover the foundation of what they assume is a colonial-era building, with objects buried under the soil. By the time I get a team together and get out there, some private collector’s

already been there, made a deal with the homeowner, and taken everything of value!”

Vivian, NMAH: Give me 10 minutes.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Harrison,” Vivian replied, leaning back in her chair.

“Doctor Lumley.”

Vivian took a deep breath. “I’ve known you for over twenty years. Why?”

Harrison, gripping the back of the chair, leaned in. “We both know you got this job not because of your credentials as a historian but because you can raise money.”

Vivian knew he was the better historian, but she had never expected him to hold it against her.

“Harrison, I know you’re mad, but I value your friendship. Please, let’s work on this. What would you like me to do?”

Harrison released his grip on the chair and paced through the office for a moment. With a deep breath, he expressed a bit of fear in his exasperation.

“Someone here, who is familiar with my research, is tipping them off. I can’t do my research in secret, but someone who knows what I’m doing knows just the right collector to call. I do all the work of tracking down the artifact, only for a millionaire to swoop in and grab it.”

It was quite a wild accusation, but Vivian knew it was the only way this situation could keep happening. Now, what would she do about it?

Harrison continued, “You said yourself last night: ‘These are our nation’s treasures, and they’re free for

everyone to see.' Some of the people taking them are on your board of trustees."

"They're your board of trustees, too," Vivian reminded him.

"I have tenure, Vivian," he said, the tone of friendship coming back to him. "Fix it."

"I will," she replied, her tone of friendship back as well. "Out of curiosity, what did they take this time?"

"I couldn't risk taking the time to go through records to figure out whose house it was, but it was in a wealthy area of Boston in the 1770s. Uncovered in the construction was a metal lockbox. From that era, who knows what could be inside."

And with that, he left. Vivian took a few moments to digest the conversation, then returned to her computer, and clicked the video chat button with Director Pagels. After a few moments, his side of the screen shone to life.

Marvin Pagels was a distinguished looking older Latino Native American. His camera window was perfectly staged to display Mayan and Aztec artwork on either side of him. His tan blazer covered a tan shirt that seemed like a lightweight Hawaiian shirt that was patterned with indigenous imagery in shades of brown.

"Vivian," he said, "Or should I say Director Guthrie. It's official now, isn't it?"

"I disposed of the 'Interim' in my title last night," she smiled.

"Well congratulations. It's well earned." His smile was genuine.

"Thanks. What can I do for you, Marvin?"

"Have you ever met a Cherokee named Joe Sitting Crow?"

She gulped. How much does she say? She knows he's somehow connected to her secret, but how much does Marvin know? She needed to play this out and see.

"I've met him. Have you?" She replied like a master in a fencing tournament, teasing out her opponent's strategy.

Marvin cleared his throat. "I just had a meeting with him. I've actually been corresponding with him for a few weeks. He claims we have an artifact that we can't identify, but that he knows is half of a hand-carved rudimentary map of the Americas, pre-Columbian. He also says he has the other half."

"Do you have it?" She asked.

"No," Marvin shook his head. "We don't have it. I allowed him to look through everything we have photographed and put online. I dedicated a team of archivists to finding it. We simply don't have it."

"Did he show you his half?" Vivian asked.

Marvin gave a slight smile. "He wouldn't. But, here's the kicker, you ready for this?"

"What?"

Marvin inhaled deeply. "He insists if we don't know what happened to it, *that you do.*"

Vivian leaned back in her chair, stunned. She looked off to the side of the screen, unable to collect her thoughts with Marvin virtually looking at her. She tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair, then returned to the conversation.

"Why would I know what happened to an object in *your* collection?"

He shrugged. "I'm wondering the same thing. But, he was, how can I describe it? *Forcefully insistent* that if we didn't know what happened to it, you would."

Again, she stared at the ceiling, and gently played with her hair for a few moments.

“Just for pure entertainment,” Vivian inquired, “is it at all possible for something like that to have been lost?”

Marvin stared intently into his camera and stated, “It’s not *impossible*.”

They both sat in thought for a few moments. Silence is always more uncomfortable on a video chat, even when the people know each other well. A video chat is the sort of tool that makes everyone think they have to be constantly talking, with no time for thought or reflection. Vivian hated them.

Marvin was the first one to break the silence. “Can you meet me in front of the Castle in twenty minutes?” Referring to the Smithsonian Castle that stood halfway between their two museums. “We should talk pixel-free.”

“I’ll be there.” Vivian closed the video chat and sat back in her chair, putting her hands together. From out the window of her new office, she had the city’s best view of the Washington Monument, even better than the view from the White House, she liked to tell people. Directly below her and across the street was the entrance to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. These Smithsonian museums like their long names, which is why people who worked there simply referred to them by their acronyms - hers was NMAH - National Museum of American History.

Down below, she could see kids and their parents, walking together between the museums. Seeing families like these always jostled loose a series of emotions. *Funny*, she thought, *spending a lifetime studying history when I have no history of my own.*



A few couples walked down the street, holding hands. That type of life was also impossible for her. She had her neighbor - Philippe - a former Methodist preacher-turned-artist-who-knew-biblical-history who seemed to want the role of boyfriend or husband or something. There were times she thought they were nearly the same age and their brains seemed to think on the same wavelength. *Maybe, just maybe, Philippe would be okay.*

Maybe he would understand when she told him her secret. Maybe they could still enjoy their midnight chats from across the balcony partition. Maybe she would still come home to a painting leaning against her door depicting what Philippe *thought* her apartment might look like. Maybe they could still enjoy morning coffee chat-and-walks as spring progressed into summer, and summer progressed into fall.

Vivian had been completely alone for thirty years, and it was a part of who she was. Alone, and okay with it. But maybe Philippe would understand, and they could be together.

But Philippe would not understand. No one could. That's why he could never be more than the artist next door.

Clara broke her trance by opening the office door.

"Sorry, Doctor Guthrie," she seemed almost unwilling to announce why she was there, "but you have a phone call from... Joe Sitting Crow."

*Might as well take it,* Vivian thought, and nodded her head.

"Line two," Clara said, and then practically scrambled out of the room.

Vivian wandered back to her desk, knowing that Mr. Sitting Crow was up to something. She picked up the receiver and punched line two.

“Mister Sitting Crow.”

“Hello, Doctor Guthrie.” The phone line removed some of the richness from his voice and left him sounding even more mysterious. “I’m assuming you’re about to go meet with Doctor Pagels?”

This would startle some people, but Vivian could easily make the connection. Sitting Crow seemed to be able to read people, and could predict the near future by people’s reactions to the present.

“I am,” she stated, emotionless.

“I won’t take too much of your time. If you’re interested, I’ll be able to take a call from you when you finish. But before that, I’d like you to remember one important piece of information.”

“And what is that, Joe?”

“Over 800,000 artifacts are missing from the collection at the Museum of the American Indian. Your advancement team has my phone number.”

And with that, the phone line went dead.

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On occasion, Vivian would work the welcome center at the museum. She liked to get a feel for the day-to-day. Kind of like an *Undercover Boss* situation without actually being undercover. Most people don’t like the boss looking over their shoulder, but when she told her employees it was an episode of *Show The Boss How Hard My Job Is*, they actually began to rather like it.

From time to time, a tourist would wander in from the outside wondering how to find the National Mall. When the welcome center worker - usually a volunteer - figured out the tourist thought the National Mall was a *shopping* mall, it was their choice whether to answer honestly or to mess with them. Sometimes, they'd say it's in Crystal City, and then direct their attention to the next guest, leaving the bewildered tourist to wonder whether this *Crystal City* is an actual place (it is), or just something like the famous *Oz*. Other times, there's a secret entrance in the L'Enfant Plaza Metro station.

Oh, and someone calling the Metro a *subway* was a dead giveaway they weren't locals. It is and always has been and always will be the *Metro*. And the National Shopping Mall doesn't exist. The National Mall is the long stretch of green grass that extends from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial, with the Washington Monument bisecting it in the middle.

Vivian liked to say Washington, D.C. resembled a giant cross. At the head, the Lincoln Memorial; at the foot, the Capitol. Left arm is the Jefferson Memorial, and the right arm is the White House. Right in the heart was the Washington Monument. Seven Smithsonian museums lined the Mall between Washington and the Capitol, and that's not counting the currently closed Arts and Industries Building, or the Castle that serves as the institution's headquarters.

The Smithsonian Castle stands as the most stately building to grace the Washington skyline in every photo since 1855. It predates the Capitol building dome and the Washington Monument. The brown, asymmetrical, grand masonry building with its tall spires was America's first grand monument to science. And its origins were a

bit of a mystery: No one quite knows why James Smithson, a British scientist who had never visited the United States, donated his entire fortune to the “People of the United States... for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

The crypt of James Smithson himself lies inside the entryway to the Castle.

Vivian’s Museum of American History is all the way on the Washington Monument side of the mall. Marvin Pagels’ Museum of the American Indian is all the way on the Capitol side. In the middle, the Castle.

In front of the Castle, across the street, is an old carousel, popular with the tourists. Today, a beautiful day in May, just before tourist and eighth-grade field trip season, the locals line up for a trip ‘round the carousel. And on the bench next to the carousel in the shade of the trees that line the perimeter of the mall, Marvin Pagels was already waiting for Vivian. She sat down next to him.

Marvin Pagels is the type of man who gets right down to business.

“Why did he think you would know where the artifact is?” he asked, staring at the Castle.

“Nice to see you, too, Marvin,” she said.

“Why does he think you know?”

Vivian shrugged. “I honestly can’t tell you. I’ve only met him once.” She thought some more. “You know how some people are, you have a fifteen-minute conversation and suddenly you’re a powerful friend they can name-drop.”

“Does the guy creep you out a bit?”

Vivian smiled and gave a single laugh. “A bit?”

For the first time, Marvin seemed to relax a little. He took out his phone and checked his messages. “I have

a board member who's active in the leadership of the Cherokee Nation. I texted her asking about our friend, but she hasn't responded yet."

It was Vivian's turn to contemplate the beauty of the Castle before bringing up the next uncomfortable topic. She took a deep breath but, unlike Marvin, turned toward the person to whom she spoke.

"Marvin, you said it wasn't entirely impossible for your museum to have lost an object."

Marvin was immediately defensive. He spoke faster, even pointing at Vivian. "Okay, my museum has never lost an artifact. I want to make that abundantly clear."

*800,000 artifacts*, Vivian recalled from Joe's short phone message. *800,000*.

"Never!" Marvin defended again.

"Okay! I believe you!" She gave a heavy sigh and looked at the ground, not knowing how to phrase her thoughts. "But how then, might it be possible-"

Marvin interrupted her. "You were an archivist, yes?"

She nodded. Marvin settled in for a long story.

"Our collection hasn't always been ours. The Museum of the American Indian started in New York City in 1916 by a collector named George Heye." He pronounced it as *High*. "You say *collector*, I say *grave robber*, others say *thief*, but still. The guy *loved* indigenous artifacts and collected them prolifically.

"To make a long story short, he died in the '50s, and his museum was bankrupt by the '80s. When it closed, their board entrusted the Smithsonian with their entire collection, and it's from that collection that the museum I run was born.

“Now, Mister Heye was a prolific collector, but he was a terrible archivist. He had an index card catalog system with no rhyme or reason. He labeled catalog entries in a way that followed no standard cataloging format. Some were alphabetical, some by region, some by indigenous group, but no *system* that anyone but him could figure out.

“On top of that, sometimes he would loan objects to other museums. Sometimes an indigenous group would want their artifact back, and he would give it to them. And he wouldn’t make any record of it. So, when we inherited the collection, we inherited a mess. We have objects for which we can’t find a catalog entry, and catalog entries for which we can’t find an object. We’ve taken to re-cataloging every object we have. But for the existing entries with no objects, we don’t know if another museum has it, or he returned it to the tribe, or if the entry was so poorly written we have the object and don’t know it, or if bugs ate it.”

“Bugs?” Vivian asked.

“The museum was bankrupt and their archive was a mess.”

“So, is it possible,” Vivian wondered aloud, “there could be an object once in the collection that has gone missing, and you have no record that it ever existed?”

With a moment of dramatic tension and a deep breath, Marvin answered, “Yes, it is possible.”

“How many artifacts?”

“Impossible to know.”

“800,000?”

He jumped up. “Where do you come up with that?”

“Joe Sitting Crow.”

He paced for a second as Vivian watched from the bench, his mind searching for connections, and then sat back down.

“No. There were 800,000 artifacts in the collection. The missing ones could number in the thousands, but not that high,” he insisted.

His phone buzzed. He took it out, looked at the message, rolled his eyes, and passed the phone to Vivian.

Marvin: Hey, ever heard of a Joe Sitting Crow? Says he's Cherokee. Seems pretty rich.

Leotie: Holy Hell

Leotie: DO NOT get involved with him.

The phone buzzed again.

Leotie: What does he want?

While Vivian pondered the phone, Marvin leaned back on the bench. The music from the carousel, while not as focused as it would be if they were closer, rang around them. The shadow of the Castle inched closer as the sun moved through the sky.

“And that brings me back to, why does Joe Sitting Crow say you know what happened to the artifact?”

Vivian had become quite good at maintaining her web of lies, understanding what fit where and how, and where the threads connected with each other. But here, she could answer with the complete truth:

“Marvin, I honestly have no idea.”

But she would talk to Joe Sitting Crow and learn. Somehow, Marvin knew that, and he didn't like it.

The distances on the National Mall can deceive you. No matter where you are, it looks like an easy walk

from the Capitol to the Washington Monument until you actually try it. You think you can just hop to the museum right next door until you take fifteen minutes to get there. Though all the museum buildings were neighbors, while sitting in front of the Castle, you have to squint to see the Museum of the American Indian in the Capitol's shadow the distance, partially obscured by the Air and Space Museum.

"You know why my museum has no corners?" Marvin asked.

Vivian looked down the mall. His museum, with its light brown wavy sandstone walls that resembled a cliff dwelling, was completely rounded, with no corners, inside or out. "Because," she recited, "some indigenous people believe evil spirits lurk in corners."

Marvin stood up, gathered his phone back, and stood on his heel about to pivot.

"And your museum, Vivian, is *all* corners."

And with that, he turned and left Vivian sitting on the bench, alone.

Vivian knew that keeping her secret from everyone else but Joe Sitting Crow would involve calling him, and dealing with whatever corners and whatever lurked within them. But first, she would sit to admire the Castle for just a few more minutes before hopping on a private plane to an unknown destination with no one but Joe Sitting Crow and an old, blindfolded man.



# Decalogue Deception

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