

## *Keys to Atlantis*

By Sally Copus

### Chapter One Who Am I? Who Are They?

#### *Three Forks Farm, Late Winter*

Though no one, including Jon himself, knew who Jon really was, his enemies had already begun to surface.

He sat alone on the bluff, looking down into the icy water as the Missouri River slowly traced its way downstream along its snowy banks. Small patches of floating ice—mini icebergs, he called them—moved silently along, like hundreds of small ships in an invading flotilla.

The silence was broken when a twig snapped from the dogwood tree above, showering him with fresh snow. He heard the flutter of wings and looked up to see a black falcon take to the grayish, overcast sky. *It's going to snow again—a nasty day for traveling*, he thought.

He stood and jogged toward the house, with Trek trotting alongside him. His thoughts drifted back to a time during his first real time-travel experience three years ago. He was sailing into the bay of Port Royal in AD 1692, a “hostage” on the Chinese ship *Red Dragon*. The morning was hot and muggy, the Caribbean sun bright, and the mood aboard the Chinese vessel arrogant. *Who did those big-headed men think they were?* he still wondered. *Did they think Captain BlackHeart or Pappy would shy away from an exchange of blood in battle with them? Didn't they know what lay in wait for them in Port Royal? They should have known what to expect after leaving a ransom note aboard the Black Opal written in my blood. I knew what would happen if I could survive until the Chinese anchored their ship. I knew Captain*

*BlackHeart would have a grand plan laid, and his crew and Pappy would help. Oh, yes! They were waiting there to rescue me...hidden until just the right moment.*

*It's a strange thing, Jon suddenly realized. He paused and leaned against a tall oak as he caught his breath. I know more about Captain BlackHeart than I do about my own father, Weston...and I only sailed with the Captain for three months or so. I know he's fair, honorable, and loyal to those he cares about. He has high morals and is a strong disciplinarian. He expects a lot—but gives even more. He enjoys life but doesn't take it too seriously unless loyalties are compromised. All these things I would love and respect in a father—my father. As it is...I don't know...I really don't know squat about my father!*

*And my mother, AryL—who was she, anyhow? Where did she grow up? And her name...AryL...so strange. Who are her parents—my maternal grandparents? Do they know I exist? If they do, why haven't they ever come to see me?*

He bent down and picked up a broken twig, and then stripped off the smaller pieces, leaving a straight stick about the length of a sword. Thrusting it here and there, he rapidly advanced through the snow, conquering his intended foe: a fallen oak lying in his path. He circled the stick high over his head and then tossed it off to one side as he kicked the snow from his boots against the tree.

Seeing a stick go flying through the air overhead interested Trek much more than resting under an oak tree. The blue-eyed, silver Siberian husky pounced into action, retrieving the stick and dragging it back to him.

Suddenly a loud screech echoed from the low clouds above. Jon looked up just in time to see a falcon diving straight for his head. He lifted his arms to shield himself as Trek barked loudly and sprang at the falcon. The bird dug its claws into the dog's fur, pecking at Trek's eyes.

But Trek was too fast. His large fangs hung in the falcon's wing tip as it struggled wildly to escape. The tip of the falcon's wing was severed as the bird pulled free of the dog's grasp. It quickly flew high, climbing into the low lying clouds.

Jon turned to Trek, "Thanks, boy. You alright?" Trek whimpered as Jon checked the wound and wiped away the small spot of blood from the side of his eye where the bird had pecked him. "Nasty bird, huh?" Jon kicked aside the falcon's wing tip with its two feathers still attached and rubbed Trek on the head. "We'd better get going. It's time for your breakfast...mine too."

He continued in a slow jog, with Trek trudging alongside him. The air was crisp and clean. He drew in a deep breath, filling his lungs as memories flowed back into his awareness. *It's been almost three years since I sailed with Captain BlackHeart on the Black Opal*, he thought. *I wonder if he'll recognize me.* Jon was now fifteen, tall and slim with blond hair, and somewhat muscular in build. And he was very much aware of the changes in his looks.

Two years of football and soccer had helped to develop his physique as well as his constant awareness of things happening about him—although he still didn't like being hit from behind unexpectedly. He had noticed that girls often whispered about him on the school campus or in hallways, but there were few he liked. Most of them seemed silly and self-focused, as if they didn't know what went on in the rest of the world. Having been homeschooled until two years ago, Jon was much more mature than most of his peers. His main interest lay in the one thing he couldn't share with his peers: time travel. And because of that, he kept most of his activities with his school chums exactly that—activities at school.

But he wasn't lonely. To the contrary, Jon could hardly keep pace with his outside activities. He rotated his fencing lessons with soccer and his newest love, archery. And there was

the historical research assigned to him by his grandfather, Alistair, who called it “a *must* if you’re going to do time travel.” With sports finished for the winter, Alistair had persuaded Jon to attend an excellent martial arts program in the city that focused on the inner strength and discipline of the samurai warrior. Jon enjoyed these classes because they taught him how to stay focused and filter out negative influences and everyday stress.

When he wasn’t working for one of his special clients, Nikos drove Jon to the city for his extracurricular courses. Alistair had met Nikos through Weston when Nikos was seventeen and a young immigrant friend of Jon’s father. So when Jon was born, Nikos became like an older brother to Jon, his protector when Alistair wasn’t around. And with that big Greek man around, *nobody* was going to mess with Jon.

Kathryn, Jon’s grandmother, had tried to keep Jon’s parents and their love for him fresh and foremost in his mind after their deaths. But for Jon, it wasn’t the same as actually having known them. Grammy reminded him often of his loving mother, AryL, a Scandinavian immigrant with long, silky, blond hair and light-blue eyes. “Nothing was more important to her than you, Jon. Don’t ever forget that,” she’d tell him.

While Alistair had shared many things with Jon about his father, he had told him very little about Weston’s work at the government’s Office of External Affairs (OEA) or about how Weston and AryL had met. That was something neither of his grandparents seemed to want to discuss. *Maybe they really don’t know*, Jon thought. *If my father had a top-secret job, maybe he couldn’t talk about it with his family.*

*Grammy and Pappy have always been the best parents any kid could want—better than the real parents of a lot of kids at school*, he thought. There was never any question about their love and devotion to him. But during the past four months, Alistair had seemed very

preoccupied—distant, even irritable. He spent most of his time working into the night on one or the other of his computers. He had a second laptop hidden somewhere in the barn. Jon had seen it. He told Jon he was working on a project with NASA, and there were always lots of equations displayed on his monitor when Jon walked into his office unannounced. Usually Alistair would close the document as soon as Jon came in. “Classified stuff,” he would say, and Jon would nod, understanding. Still, Jon missed the happy, fun-loving grandfather he had known so well, and hoped their upcoming trip would relax Alistair and bring back the good times. Jon wanted that most of all—those happy times when he was young.

The snow was coming down more heavily as he neared the historical two-story farmhouse at Three Forks that the Sinclairs called home. Smoke curled from two of the five chimneys, and the smell of burning wood intermingled with an aroma Jon immediately recognized. *Grammy’s cinnamon-apple pie—my favorite! As American as it gets. A scoop of vanilla ice cream on top?*

“Definitely!” he answered himself out loud as he smiled and picked up his pace. It was time to stop “dillydallying,” as Grammy called it. He had a few chores to do, including checking on a new litter of kittens in the horse barn. *Then off to the airport*, he thought.

Alistair opened the front door to the house and stepped back abruptly. The sight of the tall, sinister figures standing there sent a wave of anxiety through him. He hadn’t expected to encounter Kursk and his men today.

The wind had turned more northerly and blew a wisp of powdery snow through the open door in the foyer. Alistair stepped onto the porch and faced the four men as Jon jogged past them, giving a slight wave to his grandfather but paying no heed to the visitors. His mind was on other things.

Alistair turned to the man in the dark-gray overcoat. Kursk's ominous stare made the chill of the damp morning air seem even colder. His penetrating eyes bore into Alistair from under the brim of his crumpled black wool hat.

Alistair exhaled an agitated sigh. "Why are you here, Kursk? We have an agreement," he stated flatly.

"True. But as I indicated to you the last time we talked, the four of us have, shall we say, *health problems* that your medicines cannot heal," groaned Kursk, his red nostrils flaring as he spoke. "And that, Mr. Sinclair, changes things." Alistair noticed Kursk's breathing seemed very labored and accompanied by a dry cough.

"It's too cold to stand out here. This wind is brutal," Alistair said grimly. "We'll go to my office in the horse barn, where we can talk privately, out of the weather." He stepped off the front porch and hastily led them around the house toward the barn. Kursk was step-for-step right behind him, but the others followed more slowly. The tails of their long black overcoats flapped in the wind.

Alistair opened the door to the small office in the barn and waited for the others to join them. The smell of horses and oats hung in the air. Alistair pointed to the table and Kursk sat down. The two taller men assisted the extremely ailing third man through the door and into a chair at the table. The man's head, already drooping to one side, sunk deeper into his coat, his hat lying loosely on his head.

"He is very ill—of no further use to us," croaked Kursk as he forced a deep breath and grimaced. "And we...harrumph...may not be far behind him."

Alistair walked to the open-faced, freestanding adobe fireplace, struck a match, and lit the cordwood logs, which sprang to life with a blazing fire. “The fire will begin to warm us in a few minutes. What brings you out today, Kursk?” Alistair asked as he eyed the man in gray.

Kursk shuffled his feet under the table and rubbed his rough, red hands together in an effort to speed warmth into them. “The data from our transceiver indicates that you are about to take another trip, Alistair. Where to? Enlighten us.”

“My destination is of no concern to you,” Alistair said. “What is of interest to you is that this trip *should* accelerate our goal, and no one will be happier about that than me. So to that end, it appears this meeting is finished.”

“No, Mr. Sinclair, it is not!” Kursk spat out. “In the beginning, when we agreed to allow you twenty years—acting alone—to repair the computer and its support systems,” he groaned with a rasp. “It seemed a reasonable time frame, particularly given that the four of us were all about forty years into our lifespan. Through these past sixteen years, we have been patient enough. The work has been progressing—slowly, but still progressing.

“But a few weeks ago, when Thyx first became ill, we tried all the medicines you provided us, but nothing thwarted his problem. He has weakened so rapidly that he might not recover. Already it may be too late for him. And the others”—he nodded toward the men sitting at the opposite end of the table—“are fearful of suffering the same fate. We also seem no closer to accomplishing our original mission.

“Your son, Weston, made definite promises to us. He said you would help us achieve our assignment. He told me that because you were a renowned astro physicist with NASA, you have the knowledge and abilities to repair the damaged modules of our ship. He said that because you

were a legendary figure at NASA, you, above all others, have the expertise and the connections to hasten these repairs without revealing our presence here...or our mission.”

“Yes, but because of Weston’s unfortunate accident, he is no longer a part of our agreement and cannot bring about everything he had planned,” replied Alistair sorrowfully.

“It is true that his untimely demise does put a crimp in my plan,” Kursk acknowledged with a menacing half laugh, followed by a gut-wrenching cough. Clearing his throat, he leaned forward, his eyes seeming to hide in the shadows of the brim of his hat. “After Weston married, he ceased to be of much use to us. But we didn’t care. You see, by then, Mr. Sinclair, we already had come to depend on *you*. We realized *you* were the power behind Weston.”

The dancing fire in the adobe fireplace reflected a luminous red in Kursk’s eyes as he stared at Alistair from under the wide brim of his hat. “You should be careful that *our* relationship does not continue to deteriorate in the same manner as it did with Weston. Do you understand, Sinclair?”

“Is that a threat?” asked Alistair, his eyes fixed on the red glare of Kursk’s eyes. “Because, if that’s your intent, you should know by now that I don’t respond well to threats. I’ve often wondered if you knew more about the plane accident that killed Weston and his wife than you’ve revealed to me.”

“Oh, so now we’re going to talk about the plane *accident* once more?” Kursk burst into a disturbing laugh that stirred up his chronic cough again. “We always get back to that, don’t we, Sinclair?”

There was a slight creak in the door standing ajar that led to the adjoining tack room as the figure behind it moved closer to the hinged doorframe for a better look and to hear every word, no matter how insignificant.



As Kursk continued his coughing fit, Alistair quietly edged his way over to the door and looked into the tack room. Satisfied that nothing was there except the cat and her kittens, he headed back to the table.

When Kursk regained his breath, he said, “Enough of this useless prattle! No more delays, Sinclair. When will you have the time paths repaired for our travel?”

“While I’ve made much progress with traveling backward in time,” Alistair said to Kursk, “I have yet to break through the barrier of laying new and lasting paths into future time—paths that will not deteriorate, dependable paths that transverse.”

“Right now, when the *Carousel* travels backward in time, we can retrace that path back to where we originated it,” he continued. “But to draw a new path forward from this era of time to some future timeframe is impossible...because that data was destroyed when your ship crashed. I can’t just reconstruct it from thin air. I have no idea which path you took to get here. You tell me you don’t know...and these men don’t know either!”

“More excuses, Mr. Sinclair?” sniped Kursk.

“I’ve told you I need more time!” Alistair shouted, slamming a fist hard on the table. He lowered his voice and said adamantly, “The technology for this advancement *does not exist.*”

“Then we must find a way to make the ‘technology,’ as you so doggedly refer to it, and find it quickly!” roared Kursk. “Thyx cannot wait”—he coughed again—“nor can we.”

Alistair looked around the table at the men. All four had lost weight to the point of being near skeletons; their skin stretched tightly over their bones. When he had first met them sixteen years ago, they were healthy, robust men; their eyes were a brilliant blue—not gray, sickly, and protruding as they were now. All the medicines Alistair had procured for them hadn’t overcome one single fact: their bodies could not defeat the germs and bacteria of the twenty-first century.

When nothing else was said about Jon's father, the unobserved boy slipped quietly out the side door.

"I'll do what I can to fix the forward propulsion of the *Carousel*, but to do it faster will require bringing in people who are more educated in today's aerospace technology," Alistair said bluntly.

"No!" Kursk pounded his fist on the table. "*No other people!* That was our agreement! You *know* what would happen. You've seen it *before!* We can't tolerate the risk."

"Do you realize what you're asking of me?" Alistair shouted. "*How* do you expect me to reach into the future, *alone*, and make this happen before it's too late...for all of you?"

"That is your dilemma, not mine!" Kursk said resolutely. "But you *will* make it happen—and very soon! Do not make it necessary for us to intervene, Mr. Sinclair. You would not like it."

Clearly ignoring Kursk's threat, Alistair said sharply, "As I mentioned a few minutes ago, the trip I'm making could produce a significant advancement in the *Carousel's* futuristic time-travel capability." Alistair stood, signaling that the meeting was finished. Kursk also stood, then motioned for the others to follow him. As they all stepped out of the barn and into the snow, Alistair asked, "When will you return here to Three Forks?"

"Return, Sinclair?" oozed Kursk, his overly large eyes narrowing into slits. "We will remain as close as your skin is to your bones until our mission is complete. Then we will return home in the *Carousel*: heroes—mission accomplished. And just to be sure there will be no mistakes, you will be sitting at the controls of the *Carousel*, Mr. Sinclair."