

GUARDIAN'S KEEP

A MIKE SCOTT ADVENTURE

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This book is in memory of Michael Scott Burnsworth, the original Mike Scott. He died much too young, but I have never stopped hoping I made him proud.

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CHAPTER 1

Mike Scott's mind wandered from impression to thought as he gazed out across the fog-shrouded island and smelled the salt air. An early riser, he loved to be up and out with the sun, but today he rose with even more anticipation than normal: He was going in search of a shipwreck. Mike and his friends had a good idea where they might find a wreck that no one had seen since it slipped below the waves. Now it was up to the four of them to see if they were right.

They were making their way through the tiny marina on the sound side of Roanoke Island toward the open ocean on a 45-foot aluminum-hulled buoy tender that had been converted to carry divers. The coast of North Carolina, where Mike made his home, was littered with wrecks from the last several hundred years. Most of them were known and marked here in the familiarly named "Graveyard of the Atlantic," but there were still quite a few that had vanished without leaving a trace.

"Everything all right, Mike?" Mac Williams asked as he walked across the dive boat's stern and headed into the cabin. He had just stowed the last of the lines used to secure the boat to the dock and was on his way to check on the boat's captain as they made their way out to the open water. It would take them an hour to get to the dive site.

"Sure, Mac, thanks," Mike said as his somber brown eyes searched up and down the beaches surrounding the island. "I was just thinking

about what went through the minds of the men who worked these waters when they knew they were going to die.”

“That’s a little depressing. You sure everything’s all right?” the older man asked, concern apparent in his lean, wind burned face. “You said that last trip into Baghdad was a little rough. Want to talk about it?”

Mike turned and looked Mac in the eyes for the first time that morning. Mac had been around for Mike when he had struggled after assignments, including one in which he had seen a good friend killed right in front of him. This morning, however, he could see Mike’s eyes were clear and bright; he was relieved to see that his friend was feeling OK, if a little thoughtful.

“Really, I’m fine. I’ve covered plenty of war zones,” Mike said. “This one was a little rougher than most,” he added, a gentle smile playing across his darkly handsome features as he stood up to walk into the cabin with his older friend.

“I’m doing all right, Mac, really. I’m not focusing on death. When we go out like this, I always try to imagine the sailors who were on their last voyage, their state of mind as they set out and then when they realized they were doomed. Did they have regrets? Did they pray for deliverance or forgiveness? Did they think of their families?”

“Of course, that would be easier to do today if I knew whether we were going to see a new shipwreck or a rubble pile.”

“Fair enough, Mike, fair enough,” Mac said with a smile, touching the younger man’s shoulder. “How ’bout I get you a cup of coffee?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Mike Scott was a news photographer for *Time Magazine*. After traveling around the world on assignment, Mike's passion at home was scuba diving. Besides enjoying it immensely, he knew it helped him to unwind after his work. And with his enthusiasm for shipwrecks and history, he was a natural choice as the fourth diver in these shipwreck-hunting excursions.

Mike always felt the urge to understand people, even those long dead. He knew that the real story wasn't about the ship itself, or its cargo, but about the people on board. He used that same attitude with every news story he took on, whether it was his own curiosity-driven task or an assignment. He believed that was what made him a good journalist.

Mac Williams was an Outer Banks local, born and raised. He stood 6 feet tall, with a shock of short, thick hair that had been gray since his mid-30s. In his mid-50s now, he had lived and dived around the islands as long as he cared to remember. His real passion, though, was finding undiscovered shipwrecks. The storms that churned up the mid-Atlantic coast, where the Labrador currents and the Gulf Stream met, had sent thousands of ships to the bottom. Finding them wasn't the end of the adventure for Mac, either. Like Mike, he knew discovering the ship's story was just as exciting, if not more so, than the dive itself.

Mike sniffed the salty air once more, stretched and turned to his friend. "Mac, tell me again why you got me up at this time of the morning." He looked at the other two divers stretched out on the padded benches in the boat's cabin. He wished he could find sleep as easily, but the events of his life had long ago taken that ability away from him.

“You know, I’ve asked Captain Shepherd to keep the bottom-finder on when we’re running divers out to dive sites from the shop,” Mac said. “We’ve hit this same blip several times.”

“The captain has also talked to some of the fishing boat captains to see if they’ve noticed anything in this area. They’ve said there’s something out there, too. They’re just not sure what. They did say that they’ve caught big fish in this area. They’ve also lost a lot of fishing tackle around here, too.”

“Sounds like a wreck to me,” Mike nodded.

“Yep. I’ve checked this area out pretty thoroughly. There aren’t any records of a ship going down around here, though,” Mac continued. “No reports of anyone sinking a barge, scuttling any equipment or anything else.”

“What’s the wreck look like on the depth-finder?” Mike asked, peering out toward the horizon.

“The bottom around here is just flat sand, nothing else. There are a few dips and drop-offs, but that’s about it. Pretty much no way this thing, whatever it is, is natural.” Mac said, squinting at the horizon. “You’ll see it in a few minutes. The bottom rises up very suddenly. If we come up to it from the right direction, it’s about 50 feet wide, coming up about 60 feet, and then it drops back off just as quickly.” Mac paused to take a sip of coffee.

“Only one question left, then,” Mike said through the steam rising from his mug, eyes on Mac.

Mac finished his friend’s sentence: “What exactly is it?”

“That, my friend, is the question I hope we find the answer to very soon,” the older man.

Mike nodded assent. Whenever Mac and Captain Shepherd found a promising site, they would get together a team of divers and go check it out. More often than not, they would drop over the side of the boat and descend on a pile of stones or a trash heap that someone had dumped illegally. Occasionally, though, they found something interesting.

The two men slipped into an easy silence, feeling the motion of the boat as it rode through the early morning waves, each lost in his own thoughts. Minutes later—they couldn't have said how many—they heard the sound of the dive boat's engines change as it slowed. Captain Shepherd was circling their intended dive site, surveying it as best he could. He was looking for the best spot to drop anchor while judging the currents in the area, using the boat's reactions to the water's movements.

Mac stood and looked at the other two divers who had come with them on the boat. He smiled as he watched his daughter and his best friend rest comfortably on the topside cushions. He knew from experience that they were both awake: They were just as excited as he and Mike were to begin the dive, but they were ignoring him. Mac knew neither one would begin moving until he gave the word. There was no point in getting in the way, and they knew Mac would let them in on the discussion when it was time. It was better to give the man his space.

"Come on. Let's go look at what the captain has found for us," Mac shook his head, smiling, as he motioned toward the pilothouse.

"Right behind you," Mike agreed.

The two men crowded into the small control room beside Shepherd and watched the depth-finder's display screen. The captain deftly

adjusted the boat's engines as he maneuvered over the featureless spot on the ocean.

"There it is," Mike said as the image appeared on the depth-finder's screen. The boat moved above the object on the bottom. It looked like a box resting on the floor.

"Cap, let's hit it from the other end," said Mac. "Judging from this, if it's a ship, it's lying almost exactly east-west. Move farther west and come back over this same spot. Let's take another look at it and see if we can't figure out how long it is."

Without saying a word, Shepherd brought the boat around and approached the suspected wreck from the other angle. Right on target, a shape emerged and ran for several hundred feet before it dropped back to the bottom.

"No way to know until we actually get down there, but I've got to believe that's a shipwreck," Mac said, his eyes showing the excitement he was feeling. "Time to get this party started. You ready, Mike?"

"Sounds good to me," Mike replied, grinning.

"Let's wake the other two up and get them over the side," Mac agreed as the captain released the bow anchor. They left the pilothouse to the sound of the chain rattling through the winch as the heavy steel hooks raced for the sand bottom below.

"All right, you lazy bunch," Mac said, to let the other two divers know it was time to get wet. "Wake up, and let's get over the side."

Both divers stretched and stood quickly, awake and ready for action, as if they had never been asleep at all.

"All right, boss, tell us what we're looking at here," Red Oates said, as the divers assembled on the stern deck. He knew the general statistics for the dive, as they all did, but it was time for the dive briefing.

Red Oates was the backbone of the motley group. Red's encyclopedic memory for ships and the things that made them sink had helped Mac unravel many undersea mysteries. Shorter and stockier than Mac, with wiry red hair belying his Irish ancestry, Red was low-key and completely unflappable, especially when the situation got serious or dangerous. He never raised his voice or got excited.

"Yeah, Dad, it's time to let us in on the secret. What's down there?" Andie Williams asked, her sharp blue eyes twinkling. She respected her father, and had learned a tremendous amount from him, but she still liked to pull Mac's chain a little bit from time to time.

Andie was a college student, but she also managed the dive shop Mac owned. In her senior year at East Carolina University, she was working on a degree in marine archeology. Andie, named for the *Andrea Doria*, one of the most famous—and beautiful—shipwrecks of the 20th century, was a natural beauty, but couldn't have cared less. As tall as her father, she was accustomed to tying up her long blond hair in a knot, tucking it under her ball cap and hanging out with the divers at the shop.

Mac and Red had been diving together for years. Red had been around when Andie's mother had died and had helped Mac through the tough times. Andie thought of Red as her favorite uncle. He had attended nearly as many ball games and dance recitals as her father had over the years.

"If you lazy bones hadn't been sleeping, you would know we're in 130 feet of water," Mac said, a half-smile playing across his handsome features. "It slopes off just to the east down to about 200 feet.

"Whatever we're sitting on seems to jut up off the bottom pretty sharply and rises 60 feet or so. It's right at the edge of the slope, which

might explain why no one has noticed it before—whatever ‘it’ is.” Mac was drawing a rough diagram of what he was talking about on a dry-erase board.

“It may be nothing, or nothing worth looking at,” he continued, “so this may be a short dive to the bottom and right back up. We’re set up to make up to make a 30-minute dive to 130 feet and then go through staged decompression to work our way back to the surface. As soon as we get in the water, Captain Shepherd will hang additional deco bottles over the side, along with a hang bar so we can make our final stop at 15 feet.”

The divers listened patiently. They were all wearing two cylinders on their backs, with additional decompression cylinders at their sides. All were experienced divers, but they respected the discipline of dive briefings. Mike had brought along his digital Nikon camera in its underwater housing. Red had a camera as well, although it was smaller and less professional.

“Mike, if we find anything, can I get a couple of your pictures for my senior paper?” Andie asked with a roguish grin. While Andie dated guys her own age, everyone knew she had a crush on Mike. The age difference between the two (he was 35 and she was 22), and Mike’s friendship with her father kept that from developing into anything more.

“What about mine, Andie?” Red asked, pretending hurt. “What if mine are better than Mike’s?”

“Then I want yours, too, of course. But I’ve got to believe having photos from the great Mike Scott with my paper will help my grade,” Andie said, smiling at Mike and her “uncle” at the same time.

“Is that all I am now? A way to a good grade?” Mike laughed as he joined in the fun. “You’re not interested in the quality of my work, just my fame?”

“Pretty much,” Andie shot back with a sly look.

“All right, you goofballs,” Mac interrupted the banter, although he

was chuckling at the exchange. “Time to serious up.”

They planned to make the dive in two buddy teams. If they did find an undiscovered shipwreck on the bottom, the teams would split up and look for identifying marks on the boat: If it turned out to be a modern wreck, they would probably find the identifying numbers on the gunwale and the stern; with an older wreck, they might have to look for a ship’s bell or other marks like cutouts in the railing or modifications to the hull that would help single out the ship. As a group, they knew the places to look and they all were excited about the challenge.

“Mike, you and I will dive together on this one. Andie and Red will be the other team,” Mac continued, although they all knew that already, too. “Let’s get geared up and get in the water. I want a full comm check, along with the standard safety drills before we descend. I don’t want to leave anything to chance.”

All four divers were wearing full-face masks with built in communications gear—it had two channels, allowing them to talk either to their dive buddy on one channel or to the entire group on the other. Around steel shipwrecks, the transmission range was limited, especially if someone went inside the hull. However, using communications gear was still a much more efficient way to work than with hand signals.

After going through their communications check and safety drills, the divers began their descent down the dive boat’s anchor line. They were all excited about the dive and the prospects of discovery, but they still took the descent slow and easy.

“The current is picking up a bit,” Mike said to the other divers, his voice sounding slightly tinny inside the facemask. He was the first one underwater and was the deepest in his descent.

“It didn’t seem that bad on the surface, but this place can be tricky,” Mac replied. Neither diver wasted more breath on the observation. None was needed, as they were all accustomed to making dives in the area and knew how to handle the local currents.

The water was relatively clear—although none of them could see anything below them but darkness—with a slight greenish cast. As they passed 50 feet and their eyes began to adjust to the relative darkness, they all saw something ahead of them. It was a large, dark object stretching in front of them, into the gloom.

“Cap placed the anchor right at one end,” Red said, from his position at the end of the anchor line as divers descended single-file. He was always the last person down on a dive, so he could keep an eye on everyone else. “What do you see, Mike?”

“You mean this big wreck in front of me? Or are you talking about something else?” Mike asked, his good-natured sarcasm evident.

“No, the mermaid sitting on top of it.” Red’s snort was apparent even through the communications equipment.

“Looks like an old freighter,” Mike answered as he touched the railing gently. “Shepherd put us down right on the bow.”

Visibility in this area varied from 10 feet on some days to more than 100 feet on others. Today, it was somewhere in the middle. Mike could distinguish major structures on the boat in the distance, but the rest of the ship melted into the darkness. From what he could see, though, he could tell the wreck had been underwater a long time. It was thoroughly covered with sea life, giving the structures a rounded-off, fuzzy appearance, as the barnacles and anemones waved in the current.

For Mike, touching a shipwreck for the first time was an almost electric feeling. He knew no other human had seen this vessel since it

sank; that was an awe-inspiring and incredible realization. It was like opening the tomb of an Egyptian mummy or finding an ancient treasure. A journalist at heart, he immediately began thinking about the story behind the wreck. What caused it? Where was the ship headed? Did the crew know they were doomed? Or was the event too sudden for the crew to do more than simply react? Were the sailors afraid, or did they face death with the stoicism borne of years at sea?

Fortunately for him, those were the questions he and his friends wanted to answer. They didn't care whether there was anything valuable on the ship—there probably wasn't anyway—monetary gain had nothing to do with their presence this day. These four divers—Mike, Mac, Red and Andie—wanted to unravel the mystery of the wreck, while giving the men who sailed it some closure. They wanted to help each of them reach their final destination.

The other divers weren't far behind him as they descended along the anchor line. Once they all made it to the railing, Mike motioned to the side. They followed him and descended to one side of the wreck. It was lying on its side, with about a 30-degree list. By going down one side, they used the wreck to block the current that was trying to push them off toward Bermuda while they made some fast decisions on how to proceed.

“What do you think it is, Red?” Andie asked.

“Looks like a freighter from the early 1900s,” Red said. She could see his eyes probing the wreck. “The design is consistent with that era. Large smoke stacks mean coal-burning boilers.” He surveyed the rusting hulk, his eyes alight with excitement through his mask. “This is a big one.”

Mac took charge of the situation. “Mike, you and I can take basic

measurements and get pictures of as much of the wreck as we can. Red, Andie, search for anything that will tell us specifics.”

“You mean like the name written down the side?” Red’s eyes, so serious a minute before, were sparkling with humor. He could see the other divers were as excited as he was about their find.

“This wreck looks way too covered with sea life for us to get handed a gift like that,” Mac said, all business now. “You’re right about its age. Looks like it’s been underwater for 75 years or more.” He motioned toward the ship, an indication for the other divers to get busy. They knew the drill: Check for any modifications that would help identify the ship from archived pictures or details that would make it stand out from other ships its age.

“Andie and I will head for the wheelhouse,” Red finished. They all knew it wasn’t likely they be handed the gift of immediate identification this first dive, but they were eager to start the ID process.

“Mike and I will search the hull,” Mac said, a shorthand message that they all knew meant they would be searching for any sign of what put the ship on the bottom.

“Meet back here in 20,” Mike chimed in.

The two buddy teams split up and moved off to see what they could find. Although they were all working together, each group wanted to be the first to find some proof of the ship’s identity. It was an element of their personal competition.

The hills in the surrounding countryside were brown as spring rains gave way to the heat and dryness of summer. Olive groves and hay

fields covered this part of Italy—the Adriatic coast on the eastern side, opposite Rome—in the summer.

Tourist season was in full swing as Europeans came to play in the warm water and walk the beaches. The Adriatic was a glorified lake, shallow with small waves and light currents, making it the perfect place to enjoy the water. In the small resort town of Roseto, built between the sea and the hills, people walked along the boardwalk late into the evenings after eating dinner, enjoying gelato and the evening air. Most of the tourists were Italians or continental Europeans.

It was to the Adriatic, to this out-of-the-way place, that Dr. Francesca DeMarco, an archeologist from the University of Rome, had come. Many of the researchers in her department had thought her a bit odd when she announced her intentions. The Mediterranean side of Italy was rich with archeological expeditions and historical sites—above and below the water. They couldn't understand why Francesca—Frankie, to her friends—was chasing what even committed archeologists simply referred to as ghosts on the other side of the country. The words from the head of the research department still rang in her ears while Frankie floated above the work site, lost in her thoughts.

“Francesca, you are throwing away your career on this foolish errand,” the older man said. He was sitting behind his great mahogany desk, steepling his fingers as he spoke, a habit Francesca found condescending. “If you would stay here just a little longer, I will find you the perfect assignment.”

While she had been flattered at first by his attentions, Frankie soon came to realize her department head was, simply put, fond of power.

“Dr. Antonia, I don't want an assignment working on someone

else's research," she replied evenly. "I know the Guardians existed, and I know they went to the coast. I am sure of it, and I intend to find proof." She stared hard at Antonia, as she fought to keep her temper in check.

"I don't know how the review board approved this disaster, but I'll not condone it," Antonia peered at her over his spectacles. "When it fails—and it will—don't come back to me looking for a recommendation to another project or to another university." He was acting more like Frankie's father than her professional advisor, she thought fleetingly. "You will be finished." He stood up, buttoning the coat of his elegant silk suit.

"Nevertheless," Frankie replied, struggling to retain her composure, "the review board agreed that there was enough evidence to warrant further exploration. I have received funding for a short-term investigation and I'm going to go." She began walking towards the closed door. "You have no right to threaten me professionally or otherwise," she said. "Plus," she added softly, "you can't stop me." She turned her back on him so he wouldn't see her anger. "I am leaving in the morning."

Frankie was chasing scraps of evidence, including mentions in historical records. They all led her to investigate a set of ruins reported off the seacoast in the Adriatic. Within yards of the shore, locals knew something was there, but no one really knew, or cared, what it was. In a nation like Italy, with so much history buried beneath the ground and more taken in by the ocean, no one paid a lot of attention to one more set of ruins—except to steer their boats clear. Besides that, everyone "knew" that the important archeological sites were on the other side of the Italian peninsula, near Rome.

Casual, brief references in the few written records from the area

helped Frankie tie together stories of a mysterious group of Jewish immigrants to reports of a submerged settlement on the Adriatic coast. Now, she was trying to find some concrete proof of that connection, but she still had a long way to go. Archeology is expensive. Underwater archeology is doubly so, and the competition for the limited resources was intense. And money was getting short. There was something there beneath the waves, and it was old, but she hadn't been able to prove that it was ancient or that it belonged to the society of Jewish warrior priests she sought.

Those thoughts filled Frankie's mind for the thousandth time as she hovered weightlessly above the fallen-down structures of the settlement itself. For Frankie, diving wasn't a hobby or a way to relax, but a means to get to where she needed to be. On the other hand, she did appreciate the peace and quiet it provided, allowing her time to think and plan. Her breath moved in and out rhythmically through her regulator. Despite how quickly her mind moved, she was calm and relaxed, watching the divers below her setting up their equipment and organizing the research grids.

Frankie's team of commercial divers had assembled an aluminum scaffold and suspended it over the area. Not accustomed to working on a scientific site, these divers more commonly worked on underwater repairs or demolition projects. She had quickly taught them how to work more methodically, however. Plus, the underwater grid would allow them to talk about specific areas and correlate discoveries to the grid pattern.

Like their land-based counterparts, Frankie's team members had to be extremely careful so they didn't miss something small but important by searching too quickly. Workers were using suction devices like big

vacuums, powered by the boats above, to remove sediment and debris from the site. Everything they lifted off the bottom went through a strainer. Research assistants got the messy job of examining everything carefully before discarding the trash to the garbage and the sand back to the ocean. Other divers used metal detectors and small trowels to scrape away the accumulated sea life on the structures. Lying on the bottom for hundreds, if not thousands, of years the stone structures had developed a thick, colorful covering of undersea life, made of plants and animals alike.

None of that was on Frankie's mind, however, as she hovered over the site watching the divers get started. She was looking beyond the living material covering the site, searching for shapes of structures that were obviously buildings, and trying to decide where to search next. She tried to picture the site as it looked before sliding into the ocean; she imagined people walking from one building to the next to visit neighbors or to conduct commerce, cooking meals, tending gardens, raising children and living their lives. She needed to find something that would tell her, and the rest of the world, that this site was once the home of the Guardians.

She could see this all clearly in her mind, although she knew others had trouble "seeing" it the same way she did. She had studied the site and examined every inch of it, both in person and in maps and drawings she found. To some, it seemed simply a rubble field covered with multicolored sea life, but Frankie could see more. Some humps could be buildings, but others could be rocks or other natural occurrences, according to the people at the university—like Dr. Antonia—who sought to discourage her from pursuing this project.

As on any dive, all the divers kept an eye on each other; and all the commercial divers, all men, kept an eye on Frankie as they worked. They knew Frankie was hoping for a clue that would tell her exactly

where she needed to direct her efforts. They also knew, however, that she could take care of herself. They didn't watch out for her because she was a woman, or because she was the boss who signed their paychecks. Divers simply form a bond and watch each other, without being asked. It is a camaraderie that just comes naturally.

The beeping of Frankie's dive computer shook her out of her reverie as it signaled to her that she was low on air. She was still well within the safety limits, especially since she was floating in less than 20 feet of water, but she still had to surface and head back to the shore. Safety was extremely important on a scientific dive site like this, because a single slip-up could get her shut down. She began to ascend, as she had to set the best example for all her divers.

As Frankie swam up toward the beach and stood to begin walking out of the water, the diving safety officer met her.

"Ms. Frankie, let me help you with your dive gear," Aldo offered in Italian.

"No, thank you, Aldo," Frankie said, a little irritated. "I can handle my gear." She tried to smile. She didn't mean to be rude, but she wanted her divers to think of her as an equal and didn't like it when they tried to do things for her that they wouldn't do for any other diver on the site.

The man's gentle face showed some anxiety. "Ms. Frankie, I know you can take care of yourself, but it is urgent," he said. He seemed a little confused by her reaction. He was used to helping wherever he could and didn't know how to handle a woman who refused his courtesy. "You have an important telephone call. I was just trying to make it easier on you to get to it."

Frankie immediately regretted her reaction. "I am sorry, Aldo," Frankie said. "Forgive me for being rude." She knew she would never

be able to explain to the older man that she just wanted respect. She decided to drop the debate and simply asked, “Who is on the phone?”

“It is a man from the university. He said his name is Dr. Antonia,” Aldo said. “He was very firm that he needed to speak to you immediately. I told him that you were on a dive, but he said he would wait for you. I think he knows little about diving, because he wanted me to come and get you.” He said the last part with an amused look on his leathery, kindly face.

“You’re right about that. I don’t think he has been out in the field in years,” Frankie said with a laugh that she didn’t feel. Dr. Antonia was not someone she wanted to speak to right now. She didn’t expect him to call today—he checked in with her every two days—so this was probably not good news. Since that ill-fated exchange with his protégée a few months back, he seemed to be looking for any chance to shut her down, so she was immediately worried about this unscheduled call.

Frankie turned her gear over to Aldo and walked up the beach, still in her wetsuit, to answer the telephone.