

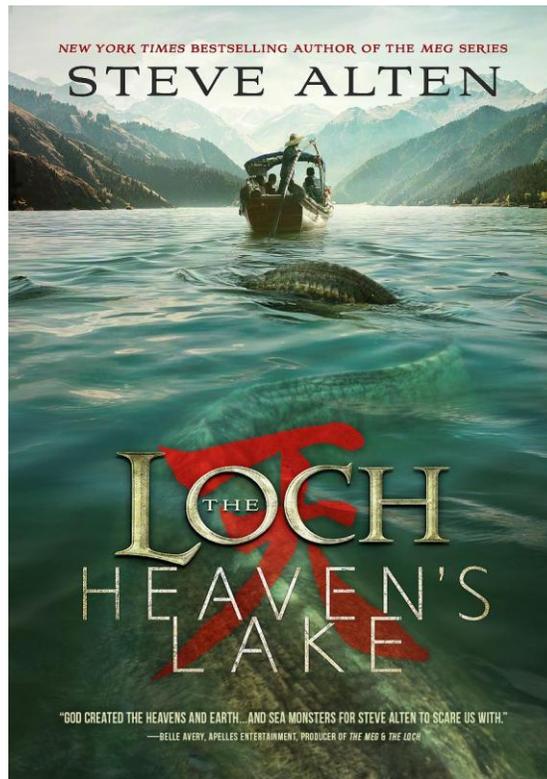
THE LOCH: HEAVEN'S LAKE

by

N.Y. Times best-selling author

STEVE ALTEN

SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW
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PROLOGUE

Dulce, New Mexico

The darkness was all-consuming. Aided by a late winter's storm, it conspired with the dense cloud cover to veil the stars and moon and heavens, effectively snuffing all light from existence. It swallowed the lake and the motorized rubber raft, its occupants unable to see their own hands as they shielded their faces from a frigid head wind blistering them with darts of hail and rain.

There were two men aboard the Zodiac and neither was whom he claimed to the other to be.

Rick Jon Anderson was seated in the bow. A big man, the Dulce resident carried two hundred pounds on his six-foot frame. A two-day stubble ran across his face in contrast to his scalp which he kept shaved clean. With a canvas of tattoos covering his arms and upper torso the local looked more like a member of Hell's Angels than an Apache. The fact that he lived on the Jicarilla Reservation either meant he met the required 3/8s American Indian heritage, or he held sway over the Jicarilla Reservation's Board of Regents to which he was a voting member.

Anderson's hands were numb from gripping the bottom of the bench seat and his body was shivering – though more out of fear than the frigid temperatures. He had been tasked with locating the black Dodge Ram pick-up truck they had left on a shoreline he could no longer see. Absent a flashlight, disposable lighter or pack of matches, he might as well have been searching for icebergs.

His eyes widened as the Zodiac's bow and bow wake suddenly blossomed out of the pitch. Turning in the direction of the whining outboard engine, he saw a lone figure hunched over an open laptop, its luminous screen cutting through the night, the computer shielded from the driving rain by a plastic poncho.

“Is it still out there? Professor Krall—”

The British scientist ignored the local man need for reassurance, his attention focused on the progress of the data uploading on his computer. Born in India, raised in England, he had attended the best schools in the United Kingdom but never seemed to fit in, his peers preferring to judge him by his ethnicity and physical appearance – his wavy black hair worn long and unkempt, matched by a five o'clock shadow. This led many of his older colleagues to underestimate his intelligence, typecasting him as a glorified graduate student rather than a brilliant academic despite his having earned three doctorate degrees in the sciences by the age of twenty-seven.

“Answer me, Charles! Is the creature still out there or not?”

The scientist looked up. He had met Rick Anderson ten hours earlier over breakfast, the interview arranged by the local man's cousin Katrina Scott, the waitress he had been hitting on since his arrival in Dulce. He had introduced himself to the attractive brunette as Professor Charles Krall; he was in town for a few weeks, hired by a private British investment firm to prepare a business prospectus on Jicarilla's seven lakes. Unfamiliar with the Apache reservation, he needed to hire a local outdoorsman to assist him in collecting water, vegetation, and tissue samples from any wildlife inhabiting the lakes. Over dinner, she suggested her cousin, Rick, who was an avid fisherman.

Krall offered Anderson the job, never suspecting that Katrina Scott was actually a Delta Force Intel Officer. For his part, the British scientist never mentioned that the wildlife he sought tissue samples from was a thirty-foot-long water creature.

“My cousin really likes you. Be a shame to screw up what could be the night of your life.”

He's desperate...afraid. Use it.

“Of course it's still out there, Rick. Where else would it go?”

“Where is it? Is it showing up on your drone's sonar?”

“I told you, I had to divert all power from the Barracuda in order to upload tissue samples. As soon as the data finishes transmitting, I promise I will finish recharging the drone and activate its

sonar array.”

“How much longer?”

He jiggled the laptop's mouse, causing the sleeping screen to momentarily awaken. “We're at 82%. Figure another minute or two.”

The flash of artificial light seemed to calm the local. “You knew it was here. That's what brought you to Dulce.”

“There is no *here*. Dulce is not a real lake; it is a man-made reservoir as you astutely pointed out during your interview. The animal that chased after us was not birthed in these waters, nor is there an aquatic-based food chain in place among any of the seven lakes that could support a biologic as large as—”

“What about humans?”

“As a food source? While lions and tigers and sharks may occasionally feast on a human, man has never been, nor will we ever be, a part of any animal's diet.”

“Tell that to those tourists who died two years ago at Loch Ness.”

“That was an entirely different lake and creature.”

“Yeah? Well whatever that thing was that attacked sure seemed intent on eating us. Had you not blasted it with that sonic noise thing I doubt we would have survived.”

The local had a point. The biologic chosen for tonight's demonstration clearly had no human restraints hardwired into its DNA.

The screen blinked on, indicating the data upload was now complete. Closing the computer, he unzipped his jacket pocket and removed a pair of ski goggles equipped with night vision lenses. He strapped them in place over his eyes, causing the darkness to bloom into sheets of olive-green, the lake an ominous dark gray abyss. Reaching for the car battery squeezed between his feet, he flipped the toggle switch, diverting power from his laptop to the drone.

Nicknamed “the Barracuda” for its resemblance to the predatory fish, the remotely-operated sea drone was three feet long from the tip of its triangular snout to the propulsion unit and rudder which made up its tail assembly. Fourteen inches in diameter and streamlined like a torpedo, the neutrally-buoyant craft could handle depths of 900 feet, had a range just short of two miles, and could reach speeds exceeding forty knots. Housed in an acrylic tube anchored to the starboard side of the Zodiac, the drone was designed to safely acquire tissue samples from biologics. Located inside its spring-loaded snout were three rotating collection tubes. Any soft tissue impact with the Barracuda exceeding 20 pounds psi was enough to engage the razor-sharp teeth-like blades anchored inside its snout and excise a finger-sized bite from its target.

The scientist waited until the recharging battery reached 30% before he powered on the drone’s active sonar, sending a loud *PING* racing through the depths. The sound wave reverberated off every object located within a two mile radius, the time and strength of the return signal converted into an electrical signal—

--the sonar’s sweeping hand illuminating the creature.

It had been shadowing them as they had followed a course to the south, the man-made reservoir shaped like the state of Florida sans its panhandle. As it had in their earlier encounter, the sound wave spooked the life form. As he watched, the biologic raced to the east -- and disappeared.

“What the hell?”

“Krall, can you see it?”

“Stand- by.” Unable to locate the creature, the scientist released another *PING*—

--the sound wave failing to find the animal even as it painted the shoreline directly ahead of them.

“...bloody hell.”

Before he could veer away the Zodiac’s bow struck the man-made lake’s eight-foot-high

embankment, the effect a result of local authorities having recently drained nearly 20% of the reservoir's volume. The sudden impact launched Rick Anderson head-over-boots from his bench seat, hurling him back-first and upside-down against the moss-covered wall of rock.

The British scientist didn't fare much better. With nothing to grab onto, he found himself airborne, flailing head-first through the olive-green void, the embankment blooming in his vision. Kicking out his legs, he managed to snag one of the middle seats with his right foot, only to bash his face against the portside inflatable, the painful collision breaking his nose and shattering his night vision goggles, casting him into darkness.

"Krall? You okay?"

"No." He snorted a mouthful of blood, gagged, and spit it out.

"Can you smell that?"

"My nose is broken, I can't smell anything."

"I can. I smelled the same scent when the creature surfaced."

"Anderson, the creature's gone. The sonar spooked it."

"You're wrong. You think you're so clever, don't you Dr. Singh? That's right, I know who you are. You're Timon Singh, Noble Prize-winning geneticist. You disappeared off the face of the Earth nine years ago before you could get to Oslo to collect your money. What happened? Did you find the needs of the private sector too... ahh! Ahhh!"

Timon froze. His pulse raced, his body trembled. More unnerving than Rick Anderson's screams was the abrupt silence that followed—as if nature had suddenly been placed on mute. The only sounds were small waves lapping along the bottom of the inflatable raft and his pounding heart.

He registered a strange tapping on his ski jacket. For a surreal moment he ceased shaking as a soothing warm rain rolled down his neck and into his undergarments.

And then he realized it was blood.

Very slowly, he slid his right hand into his pants pocket. Feeling the rental car's keyless entry, he pressed the alarm.

The incessant horn blasts and flashing headlights vanquished the darkness, revealing the monster. Intelligent and amphibious, it had been lying in wait atop the embankment next to the pick-up truck. Leaning over the ledge, it had plucked the local sportsman from the embankment by his head, its scalpel-sharp teeth -- 4 to 5 inch long needles -- puncturing the man's neck, shoulders, and chest, the blood spurting as if from a fountain.

Suspended six feet above the water, Rick Anderson's legs thrashed and kicked wildly at the night, the dying man in agony.

My God... he's still alive!

Timon's limbs shook in terror as the beast glanced down at him with one of its jaundice yellow eyes and hissed.

“Oh, God—”

The funnel of light cut through the sleet-laden night, blinding the hideous predator. It shook its massive head, whipping its bizarre mane of tendrils to and fro, each oily cord-like whisker as long as a grown man's arm and as thick as a thumb. As the monster screeched in protest a barrage of eight-inch-long tranquilizer darts struck its neck like a swarm of giant mosquitoes, burying the elixir held within their syringes into a patch of flesh behind the fish's gill slits.

The diamond-shaped head rolled up twice before collapsing out of Timon's sight line with a resounding *thud*.

Before he could gather his thoughts, a team of soldiers dressed head to boots in black parkas and matching jumpsuits were dragging him up the steep embankment. He was wrapped in a thermal blanket, one of the commandoes demanding his attention.

“Keys.”

He reached into his pocket and handed him the keys to the truck – the horn alarm silenced as he was led to the back of an awaiting van. Just before the door slammed closed and the syringe pierced the marine biologist's neck his eyes locked on to a gated exit, the track lighting illuminating a ten-by-twelve foot sign.



The Loch: Heaven's Lake