

Written In Time?

The desert heat pressed down on the dig site like a hand refusing to lift. Dr. Caleb "Cal" Finch wiped sweat from his brow, staring into the narrow chamber they had uncovered that morning. The sandstone walls bore extremely old, faint tool marks.

This was real history. And his interns were buzzing like flies

"Careful," Cal snapped as one of them leaned too far inside. "We don't know what's..."

"Dr. Finch," Maya interrupted, her voice sharp with disbelief pointing into the chamber. "You need to see this."

Sitting on the dusty stone floor, absurdly out of place, was a brown glass bottle.

Cal's stomach tightened.

An IBC root beer bottle.

"No," he said flatly. "Absolutely not."

The interns exchanged glances. Someone snorted. Cal climbed down, boots crunching softly against sand. The bottle was real. Its signature label smoothed some by time but still etched into the glass. A thick layer of dust clung to it, undisturbed until now.

"This isn't funny," Cal said, rounding on them. "Which one of you did this?"

No one spoke, only glanced at one another.

The bottle was sealed with darkened wax. When he shook it, something rattled inside.

"A prank," he muttered. "A very elaborate, unprofessional prank."

"But sir," one intern said, "how would we even get that down there without disturbing the dust?"

Cal didn't answer, his hands trembling.

"Open it," Maya said. "If it's fake, you'll prove it and we can get back to work."

Cal hesitated, then sighed. Authority mattered. Control mattered. And this nonsense was undermining both.

"Fine," he said. "Let's put this to rest."

He chipped away the wax with his field knife. It cracked easily, flakes falling like dried blood.

Inside was a folded piece of paper, yellowed and brittle. Cal unfolded it slowly.

His breath caught, the handwriting was his! Every sharp angle, every impatient loop, unmistakable.

Cal, it read. If you're reading this, then I failed. There is a box buried beneath this chamber. Do not open it. Do not study it. Destroy it without breaking the seal. If the contents are released, history will repeat itself.

A murmur rippled through the interns.

Cal's face flushed hot. "Enough," he snapped. "This has gone too far."

He scanned the rest of the page, ready to tear it apart, until his eyes landed on the final paragraph.

You won't believe this is real, so here is proof. When you were six, you broke your mother's music box and buried the pieces behind the mesquite tree. You told no one.

Finch staggered back as if struck. The interns fell silent. His heart hammered. No one knew that. Not colleagues. Not friends. Not even his wife. The note slipped from his fingers.

They found the box an hour later, buried exactly where the letter said it would be. Stone. Smooth. Seamless. Ancient symbols etched into its surface, worn by time and something else Cal couldn't name.

"Sir," Maya whispered, "what do we do?"

Cal stared at it. He believed the warning. He knew he should destroy it, seal it away forever. But curiosity had always been his greatest flaw, the same curiosity that led him into archaeology, the same curiosity that whispered "what if" now.

"If I wrote the note," he said slowly, "then I must have opened it before. Which means I survived."

Before anyone could stop him, he pried the box open.

Light exploded outward. The desert vanished.

Cal gasped and stumbled forward, boots striking familiar sand. Dry, relentless heat hit him instantly. The sun burned overhead. Wind hissed through the rocks, carrying the sharp scents of stone and dust.

Heart pounding, he spun around.

Behind him, stood an unexcavated mound of sandstone, smooth and whole, untouched by tools or time. No tents. No ropes. No generators. No voices calling his name.

The dig site was gone. Finch backed away and nearly tripped over something at his feet. A bottle, clean, new, and unopened. No dust. No wax. No age.

His stomach dropped. "No," he whispered.

He scanned the horizon. Where the access road should have been, there was nothing but endless desert, no tire tracks, no footprints, no sign anyone else had ever stood here.

The truth settled over him like the heat. There was nothing. Only desert, rocks, wind and time.

Finch noticed a short way off the corner of a familiar box. He screamed as understanding closed around him like the desert itself.

History, it seemed, was very good at keeping its secrets.