

**Dear reader,**

This scene was originally written as the opening to *Echoes of Fortune: The Knights of the Golden Circle*.

Its purpose was simple: to introduce Jack and Emma in a quiet moment—after the danger, after the chase—before the larger conspiracy took hold.

As the novel evolved, that opening no longer served the story’s momentum. The book needed to begin deeper inside the threat, not in its aftermath.

Cutting this scene was the right decision.

Still, it reveals something essential about Jack and Emma—what it costs to chase history, and what lingers once the danger has passed.

This moment remains here as an author’s cut.

David

**An Author’s Cut**

**September 2, 2017**

**Deep Creek Lake, Maryland**

*A month after finding General Braddock’s treasure*

They’d earned this. One lazy afternoon on the water. No codes to crack, no one trying to kill them.

Then Emma’s hand broke the surface, fingers spread wide, searching, and Jack knew the peace was already over.

“My ring!” Water sloshed as she spun, voice cracking. “Jack, it’s gone!”

His drink shattered against the pontoon deck. Already moving, he flipped open the bench seat and grabbed his dive mask. Always there. Just in case.

“When did you last see it?” Cold bit through his skin as he waded in.

“Five minutes ago. Maybe less.” Her voice broke. “I think it slipped when I dove. God, Jack, it just...”

The lake swallowed him before she finished.

Darkness surged from stirred silt. His lungs burned as fingers swept through mud and stone, finding only emptiness. Something sharp scraped his knuckle. A flash of silver vanished in the swirl.

Breaking the surface, he gasped. “Going again.”

Emma stood frozen on the swim platform, arms wrapped tight around herself.

Second dive. Third. Only silence below.

On the fourth plunge, he pushed deeper into the murk. His chest screamed. Black spots rimmed his vision. Pressure closed around his ribs like a vise, and still he clawed through the lakebed.

Empty-handed wasn’t an option. Not now. Not ever.

Above, Emma counted heartbeats that stretched into hours.

One minute. Two. Three.

“Jack!” Terror bled into her voice.

The surface was still. A few bubbles rose, then nothing.

Her mind recoiled, but the image came anyway.

*Swallow Falls. Jack vanishing beneath the foaming current. Steve diving in, yelling something she couldn't hear over the roar. Her own voice screaming his name until her throat went raw. Then Steve reappearing with Jack draped across his shoulders, limp, head slumped forward.*

*Not breathing. Not moving.*

That stillness before he gasped. It never left her.

And now here she was again. Waiting. Watching. Counting seconds she couldn't bear to finish.

Four minutes.

Just as his chest felt ready to burst, his fingers grazed something small and hard. Heart hammering, he surged upward and broke the surface, gasping.

Her palm cracked across his cheek.

"Four minutes." Her voice was barely a whisper. "You were under for four damn minutes."

The tears came next. Sudden. Fierce.

Jack smiled through streaming water and opened his fist. The diamond caught the last rays of sunlight.

"You found it?" Her hand flew to her mouth.

He nodded, still breathless.

Emma rushed forward, arms around him, clutching with desperate force.

"I don't care about the ring," she whispered into his shoulder. "I just got terrified."

Jack pulled back and brushed wet hair from her face. Droplets clung to her lashes like tiny prisms.

"You weren't scared about the ring."

"No." The word cracked. "I was terrified of losing you. Like at the falls."

The weight of memory settled between them. Missed calls. Silent deployments. Weeks when she'd thought he was gone for good. And that moment by the waterfall when she nearly lost him forever.

His fingers trembled as he slid the ring back into place, still warm from his palm.

Air hadn't mattered down there. Risk hadn't mattered. Nothing had mattered but finding that ring, because losing it felt like losing her.

"You won't," he said quietly. "Not this time."

They stood in the twilight water, the lake lapping gently around their waists. No more words needed.

Not chasing gold or glory.

But later that night, Emma would wake in the dark, hand pressed to his chest, counting heartbeats until she was sure.