THE HIDDEN

An Annika Vahle Novel

By JG Faherty
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Six Months Ago

Rain fell in steady sheets, attacking trees and humans alike with its fury. Torrents of water poured down the southern slope of Wai Sano and cascaded over a wide fissure in the rock, creating a waterfall powerful enough to carve a gully in the thick, black soil as it flowed downhill.

Goda and Bimo held their arms over their heads as they struggled up the slick path toward the shelter they desperately needed, not only from the weather but the heavily armed *militer* following them.

Goda's heart pounded and fear ate at him like a starving animal. How *bodah* they'd been to think the guards wouldn't be out just because of a storm. What was a little rain to mercenaries who worked for the evil man everyone called *El Jefé?* Now their only chance for survival was the cave located halfway up the ancient volcano. It was a forbidden place, guarded by the *uru*, the spirits of the mountain. But they had no other choice. If they could make it up there, perhaps they could hide from the soldiers in the darkness. Otherwise, they were as good as dead.

"Kila-kila!" Bimo grabbed him as his feet slipped again. "Hurry. We are almost there."

Goda wiped water from his face and looked up. A giant black eye stared at them from a few yards away. Digging his fingers

into the earth, he pulled himself forward and scrambled like a crab into the safety of the opening.

Within the dim confines, the stone walls were nearly as wet as the path outside, heat and humidity combining to create sauna-like conditions. A small stream flowed through the center of the cavern to the lip, where it merged with the miniature waterfall at the entrance. Panting as much from the steamy air as from their exertions, the two men took out their phones and used the flashlight apps to illuminate the cave.

"Now what?" asked Bimo, his eyes wide and his face corpse-pale in the gloom.

"*Diam*." Joaquin held a finger to his lips. Using hand gestures, he indicated they should move farther from the entrance. Shoulder to shoulder, they walked deeper into the cavern. With each step, the dread in Goda's belly grew stronger, and he kept glancing behind him, expecting to see *El Jefe's* men with their guns aimed and ready to fire. More than once he caught Bimo doing the same thing. But there was no movement other than their own shadows, no sounds except their own breathing and the murmuring gurgle of the tiny stream.

Yet he couldn't shake the sensation of being watched.

Goda's heart beat faster and a cold sweat broke out on his face and back. He turned again, certain someone was sneaking up on them.

The cave was empty.

Bimo came to a stop. “I can’t go any farther,” he whispered, shaking his head.

Terror froze Goda’s legs at the same time. It took all his self-control not to run screaming from the cave. A single thought repeated in his head. *Leave. Leave. Leave!*

But behind them lay certain death. Their only chance of survival was to continue on and hope *El Jefe’s* men took their search somewhere else in the forest.

“Just a little more,” Goda said, forcing his legs to move.

“No.” Bimo wrapped his arms around his chest. His phone slipped from his hand and the light went off. The darkness closed in a little more around them and Goda couldn’t stop a whimper from escaping his throat.

“Do you want to die, *bebal*?” Goda pulled at his sleeve. Eyes wide, Bimo batted his hand away.

“I’m no fool. This is a bad place, I feel it. Maybe the—”

A faint sound stopped him. Goda’s blood froze. He’d heard it, too. Whispers.

Someone was coming!

Goda played his light around. The beam only illuminated a few yards. Beyond that lay impenetrable blackness. Which way had the voices come from? The acoustics in the cavern made it impossible to tell. He turned in a slow circle.

Nothing.

More whispers.

Behind them.

He spun in that direction.

Three figures stood there. Goda blinked and they were gone.

Before he could turn again, something struck the back of his skull and he fell, his phone tumbling away. Strong hands gripped his head and twisted. Bones cracked and a lightning bolt of pain coursed through him, leaving numb flesh in its wake.

Bimo screamed, his cry the last thing Goda heard before the darkness claimed him.

“Uru!”

CH. 1

Present Day

The thumping roar of the helicopter shattered the silence of the morning.

It came in from the east, silhouetted against the sun, flying low over the plateau. Frowning, Annika Vahle raised a hand to her eyes. She'd neither seen or heard anyone other than her team for two weeks. The sudden raucous appearance of the modern world near their dig was an unwelcome intrusion.

Her annoyance changed to unease as the helicopter slowed, hovered for a moment, and then began to descend, the rotors whipping up Arizona dust and causing the tents to flap madly.

"What's going on?" a voice shouted next to her. Her assistant, Roy Fishman, had his arm up in front of his face to block the debris-filled wind.

"I don't know, but I'm going to damn well find out," she replied, stalking across the brown October grass. Whoever it was better have a good reason for making a mess of their camp, she thought, watching notebooks and sample bags flying off tables. As she approached the chopper, her students watched wide-eyed from various points of the excavation site.

The helicopter door opened and two men stepped out. Her anxiety grew worse as she recognized one of them. Wilson Owens,

Professor Emeritus and former Chairman of the Paleoanthropology Department back at Case Western.

"Annika!" he shouted, unsuccessfully trying to keep what remained of his gray hair from flying about madly in the wind. "Sorry to barge in like this."

"What's the matter?" she asked. Her old friend wouldn't have flown out to the middle of nowhere just to say hello.

He gestured toward the tents. "Inside, if you please. I'll explain everything." The second person, who appeared to be of Malaysian descent and looked to be in his early fifties, tagged along behind, his arms wrapped around a large cardboard box.

Confusion warred with annoyance as Annika led the way to the long tent they used for everything from meals to sample preparation.

"Wilson, this had better be—"

"Annika, this is Chahaya King, a former student of mine."

The man nodded. "A pleasure to meet you, Dr. Vahle."

"Nice to meet you, too," Annika said, unable to keep her frustration from coloring her tone. "Will one of you please—"

Owens pushed the box toward her. Customs stamps in English and a language she couldn't identify covered the top. "Look inside."

Jaw clenched, Annika pulled a well-worn Swiss Army pocketknife from the faded tan bush slacks she habitually wore

and sliced through the packing tape. Foam peanuts spilled out as she folded the flaps back and reached inside.

"What is it?" Roy asked, entering the tent and planting his tall, lanky frame next to her.

"It looks like—Jesus Christ!"

Roy jumped at her exclamation. "What?"

Annika shook her head, unable to form words. She lifted an object from the box, holding it as carefully as delicate china, and set it down on the table. Roy leaned forward to get a closer look, his pale flesh a sharp contrast to his dark green field shirt and pants.

"A mandible?" He frowned. "Looks like it's from a big monkey or small ape. What's the big deal?"

"It's not a monkey," Annika said, her mind fighting its way back from her initial shock. She tucked a lock of dark-brown hair behind her ear, a habit she'd had since she'd been a little girl. Her mother had always called it her get-serious pose. She looked at Owens, who was staring at her with a wide smile that would've put the Cheshire cat to shame.

"Is this real? It can't be real. You're shitting me, right?"

"It is most assuredly real," he said, and King nodded.

"Will someone tell me what's going on?" Roy practically shouted.

Owens started to answer, but Annika held up her hand. "Pretend this is a practical exam, Roy." She tapped the knife gently against a yellowed molar, one of only five teeth remaining in the impossible-yet somehow there it was!—lower jawbone. "Question one. Hominid or hominin?"

"Trick question." Roy smiled. "All hominins are part of the hominid line, but all hominids are not hominins."

Annika nodded. The hominin lineage included *Homo sapiens* and all its ancestors, even those from other species, such as *Australopithecus*. The hominid line included all hominins plus all the great apes and their family tree. It was one of the first things any paleoanthropologist learned. Annika said so, and then asked the question again, forcing Roy to second-guess his answer.

He frowned and bent closer to object, his shaven skull gleaming under the overhead lights. He scratched idly at his narrow goatee while he studied the bone. It took him several moments before he saw what Annika had noticed immediately.

"Something's not right. It's too long and narrow to be human and too wide for a monkey or chimpanzee. So definitely hominin."

"Mmm-hmm. What else?"

Picking up the mandible and angling it toward the light, Roy pointed at a molar. "That molar looks almost modern, but the

premolar, it's...well, if it wasn't in this jaw I'd say it was *Australopithecene*. But even that doesn't track."

He put the mandible back on the table. "Too many dissimilarities between the jaw and the teeth. Someone's playing a joke on you."

"It is no joke," King said. "I work at the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta. This was brought to me by a man who teaches History and Maths at the high school in Ruteng, on the island of Cabo de Flores. Two of the local children found it in a cave and gave it to him. They said it was the skull of a *lai Ho'a,* a magical ape-man. I immediately recognized it and received permission from my superiors to enlist Dr. Owens' assistance. I did not know he had retired."

Roy picked up the jaw again. "So maybe that kid is the one playing the joke. He and his friends got their hands on the jaw of a deformed child and stuck some monkey teeth in it."

Annika smiled. Roy was one of the most intelligent grad students she'd ever had, but he often needed a push to make him think outside the box. "You really don't recognize it, do you?" At his quizzical look, she shook her head. "What makes you say it's from a child?"

"That's obvious from the size."

"So, small size, primitive structure, and mismatched dentition."

Roy nodded. "Adds up to a hoax in my book. Someone's pulling a Piltdown Man," he added, referring to the most famous anthropologic deception in history.

"I guess you've been so busy on your thesis you haven't gotten around to reading my last book yet?" Annika crossed her arms. "Chapter eighteen, to be specific."

Roy frowned, and then his eyes went wide. "Um, I...wait. *Homo floresiensis?"*

"Bravo." She clapped her hands.

While Roy shook his head, still unable to believe the evidence in his hands, Annika looked at Owens.

"I guess this means I'm cutting the dig short."

###

"Are you sure about this?" Arnold Worthington closed the file and looked at Annika. "You're asking me to commit a lot of funds based on one piece of bone. Funds, I might add, that Case Western doesn't really have right now."

"Not just a bone. A full mandible and several teeth," Annika corrected the Head of the Anthropology Department. The décor of his office resembled the dark, mysterious style of anthropologists' offices as depicted in the movies of the 1930s, a style Annika privately thought of as 'explorer kitsch.' "You

know damn well that's more than enough to base an entire field season on."

Worthington leaned forward in his chair, which was hand-upholstered wildebeest hide, and sighed. "I know, I know. And you're sure about the date?"

Annika nodded. "I had Amar and his boys check it three times. It's definitely less than a thousand years old. Maybe less than five hundred."

"And it's really *Homo floresiensis?"*

"It is." Annika kept her voice calm, knowing exactly why Worthington was having trouble believing her, despite Wilson Owens' supporting opinion. Until that moment, all the existing fossil evidence indicated *H. floresiensis*—colloquially known as Flores Man—an odd offshoot of the main hominin line that eventually led to modern man, had died out approximately thirteen thousand years ago. Meaning that if the Anthropology Lab's team had done their testing right—which she had no reason to doubt, not after making them run the tests two additional times—she had proof that an ancient species had actually been alive in modern times and possibly interacted with the Europeans who'd settled on the Indonesian islands.

Just like the legends of Flores said.

Worthington chewed his lower lip as he stared at Annika's request for funding. "I still don't know..."

"Arnie, I hate to push, but we have to get this done fast if we're going to get any work accomplished before the rainy season starts in Flores."

He looked up again, a rueful smile tugging up the corners of his thick lips. "I don't suppose you'd consider putting it off until next year?"

Cutting off her explosive reply, he waved a hand at her. "Just kidding. All right. I'll fast track it past the Board. It'll take a few days for the official approval, but you have my word. Start putting your team together."

"Yes!" Annika jumped from her chair.

"Hold on a minute. We still need to get permission from the Indonesian government. I'll get that ball rolling, too. But save some room for local scientists on the dig; odds are the Indonesians will insist on at least a couple, and probably one or two from one of the Australian or Indian universities as well."

"No problem. I'll need local guides anyhow, and it'll be cheaper to rent vehicles there."

"Well, get going then." He motioned to the door. "And don't let us down."

"I won't."

CH. 2

Annika leaned her face against the tiny airplane window, hoping the cold plastic against her skin might help kick her brain into working correctly.

I should be sleeping. This is my last chance before we land in Jakarta.

Once they touched down, the next two months would be a whirlwind of hectic activity. In the field, every moment counted. You were always up before dawn and you didn't crawl into your sleeping bag until midnight or later. Not that the past two weeks had been any less crazy.

Although she'd already been on several field expeditions in the other countries and directed a few small but successful ones in the U.S. western states, this would be her first time leading an international dig. She was quickly learning that foreign expeditions came with their own unique set of hurdles to conquer.

The first steps had been easy enough. Getting one of her grad students, Marsha Williams, to cover her classes for the rest of the semester. Marsha was the perfect choice. As a mother of two-year-old twins, she wasn't available for an extended trip outside the country. Then it was putting together her team, which had to be done carefully.

Like any museum or university, Case Western believed in piggy-backing as many different specialties on one project as possible, to get the most research return for their hard-to-come-by dollars.

The Government of Indonesia had given them permission to bring seven people. The official representatives for the National Museum of Indonesia, as yet unnamed, would be waiting for them in Jakarta.

Annika had been relieved to hear that the museum in Indonesia would also be supplying a professional photographer, alleviating her of the need to waste one of her six spots.

She'd chosen her team carefully, remembering her grad school days with Bruce Latimer in the Olduvai, Afar, and Omo sites in Africa. The names of those renowned places still brought a sense of wonder to her. Long hours working in the hot sun, unable to believe she was standing in the very cradle of life, the same place where australopithecines took their first evolutionary steps toward true humanity. The place where illustrious scientists with names like Leaky and Johanson made historic discoveries and changed what science knew about the evolution of man.

Latimer and his staff had taught her many things during those exhausting but rewarding field seasons, one of which was to surround yourself with people who had multiple skills. After

much thought, she'd put together a list and approached the individuals she wanted with her, all of whom immediately accepted her offer and now occupied seats on the same KLM flight.

She went over them again in her head as she stared out into the darkness.

Roy Fishman, her senior grad student, had been an obvious choice. Tall, skinny, and prone to complaining, he had previous field experience and was showing sparks of brilliance in his studies of hominin leg and foot morphology. Plus, as her assistant for the past two years, he was already well-acquainted with her style and quirks.

Annika's expertise was hominin dentition and forensic paleoanthropology, so between the two of them they had the main focus of the trip covered.

Steven Webster was the oldest member of the team at fifty-five. The short, stocky paleobiologist specialized in Australian and Indonesian mammals and marsupials of the Pleistocene. Not only would his expertise help with the dating of any hominin findings based on the mammalian fossils located in conjunction with them, but hopefully he'd unearth potentially new data on the evolution of various species in the Indonesian archipelago.

Because any field expedition also needed a geologist, Annika had recruited Bernadette Clarke, Vice Chancellor of the

Geology Department at Case Western. Clarke, a stocky woman with multiple publications and books to her credit, preferred the nickname Bernie. No stranger to field work, she was eager to study the volcanoes of Flores. She'd also be in charge of packing any rock and mineral samples for carbon dating, which would be done at Case Western.

Danny Chen would be Annika's computer and electronics expert, a specialty that was rapidly growing more important in field work. Not only would he maintain their laptops, radios, ground-penetrating radar, ultrasound equipment, and satellite communications hardware, but he'd ensure the proper transmission of all data back to Case Western each night, so nothing would be lost in the event of a physical catastrophe at camp. Due to its volcanic nature, the island of Flores was prone to earthquakes. That, plus the ever-present humidity and rain, would keep Chen's hands full.

Rounding out the rest of the group were three additional grad students, nicknamed the 'pack mules' by Roy.

Not an unrealistic description, Annika thought with a smile, remembering the packing, hauling, and general dirty work she'd done on her first field trips as a Masters candidate. Anton Schnell, Shari Zhara, and Matt Grundig were all first-timers, all part of Annika's department, and all possessed of various field-essential skills, such as Grundig's hobby of

automotive engine repair and Zhara's training as an emergency medical technician.

With Arnold Worthington's help, and by calling in a few favors, she'd assembled everything they needed with two days to spare before their midnight flight from Chicago to Paris. During those two days she'd tried several times to get in touch with Butin Nasution, her contact at the National Museum, but he wasn't responding to Annika's text messages and his secretary kept telling her the Director was unavailable at the moment. The twelve-hour time difference between Chicago and Jakarta hadn't helped, either.

So now we're four hours away from landing in a foreign country, with no idea of who's meeting us, who's working with us, or what our transportation status is.

She could almost hear her old mentor laughing.

"Welcome to the big leagues, Annika," he'd probably say.

The weight of responsibility seemed heavier than any pack she'd ever lugged up a hillside or across a desert. The first woman to lead a major archeological expedition in Flores. Her gender and mixed heritage—Swedish father, Black mother—had worked in her favor when she'd been young, opening all sorts of scholarship opportunities. But competing in the academic world had been harder than she'd expected, with all the stereotypical bullshit that particular situation naturally engendered in a

male-dominated profession.

This could be a defining moment in her career.

She caught her reflection in the window and grimaced. The stress showed in her face, the poor lighting and warped plastic emphasizing the dark circles under her eyes and turning her complexion a sickly gray, while twisting and distorting her features until she resembled a gargoyle.

Sleep, Annika. You're going to need it.

She closed her eyes, knowing it was pointless. She was too tense, too anxious.

I should have taken a sleeping pill when we left Paris. Roy had offered her one, insisting that the best way to beat jet lag was to force yourself to sleep according to your destination's time zone. Most of the others had taken his advice, although she'd heard Shari and Matt talking a couple of hours ago.

They're young. They don't need sleep like you do.

She remembered those days well, back when she'd been twenty-five and could work a dig all day, drink beer until midnight, and still be ready to go at six a.m. Had that only been fifteen years ago? So much had happened since she'd gotten her Ph.D. The internship at the Institute of Human Origins. Digs with Latimer and other top anthropologists. Coming full circle and earning a spot back at Case Western, based as much on two decently selling books about her time in the field as on her

actual credentials. Being a woman with an attractive smile for the back cover hadn't hurt.

It's not how you get the job, it's what you make of it.

More of her mentor's advice, right after the offer to teach at Case had come in. She'd been afraid the combination of her physical status and not having any real discoveries of her own would lead to a lack of respect in the department.

And she'd been right. Especially in the beginning. Despite working hard the past seven years, putting together a recognized program of study, and writing a third book—this time a scholarly, far less exciting treatise on hominin jaw structures—she hadn't yet shaken the stigma of being the new kid on the block. A sophomore among seniors.

Things might be very different in two months.

Annika's natural pessimism wouldn't allow her to dream big—the idea of finding conclusive evidence of a living *H. floresiensis* population was too much to hope for—but she did let a little spark of hope shine through. They would come home with something good. Nothing major, just enough to get her on the map. More teeth. Another jaw. Maybe even a partial skull or skeleton, something much younger than the thirteen- to eighteen-thousand-year-old artifacts that up to now were the only clues to the tiny hominins often referred to as the "hobbits" of the *Homo* family tree.

Something. *Anything*. Just so long as her first field expedition didn't end up in failure.

With a sigh, she dug out the file on Flores Island out of her duffle.

If she couldn’t sleep, she might as well study.

CH. 3

Herve Espinosa stared out at the early morning rain and cursed. The *isla* of Flores was a shithole, a sweltering, steamy bucket of *mierda*, worse by far than the jungles of his native Colombia. At least back home he'd been able to leave the *finca*, the plantation, and travel to modern cities. What was there in Flores? Jungle, mud, and a few towns so small it was a cruel joke to even list them on the maps.

It hadn't seemed so bad when he'd moved his *cocaina* operations there. He'd selected Indonesia in general because it met his criteria in the three most important areas: it already had a thriving coffee business, the government was amenable to bribery, and it was as far from Colombia as he could possibly get.

When you had a death sentence hanging over your head, that last item became very important.

With hundreds of barely-inhabited islands to choose from, Espinosa had done a thorough evaluation of all the available properties and settled on an old coffee plantation on Flores because it offered relative seclusion yet it still had access to everything he required. There was a small airport with regular puddle-jumper flights to the main islands, towns large enough to supply booze and staples but not so large as to have a

government presence, and only a very small eco-tourist trade, which was limited to one end of the island, far from the property he'd bought. Definitely not the luxury he'd been used back home, but he'd figured once the money started rolling in he would make some changes.

Setting up the *cocaina*—what back in Columbia they'd called *coca*—plantation and the associated laboratory for manufacturing and packaging the *coca* hadn't been easy. There'd been months of hard work before the first crop was almost ready for harvest and the infrastructure for sales in place.

And that's when the problems started.

No one paid much attention the first couple of times the ground shook. Colombia had its share of earthquakes, too, enough of them that Espinosa and his hand-picked men didn't pay much attention when they happened here. In a way, it reminded them of the home they'd been forced to leave. The natives didn't seem troubled by them, either.

Then the tremors grew violent.

It turned out that one of Flores' several volcanoes, the one the locals called Wai Sano, had decided to end its eons of slumber.

And it sat right at the edge of his property.

A fucking volcano. This wasn't supposed to happen!

Espinosa sipped his *café con leche* and grimaced. When he

bought the plantation, it was with the understanding that Wai Sano was perfectly safe. Although Flores did have some mildly active volcanoes, Wai Sano hadn't so much as burped in hundreds of years.

Just my luck, it picks now to open its eye.

Earthquakes were annoying but you had to expect them, considering the whole chain of Indonesian islands was tectonically active. A volcano was a different story. Not only did it present the possibility of real danger, but then they'd gotten word from their contact in Jakarta that a group of scientists were on their way to Flores, presumably to study the volcano.

It was one thing to pay off some government officials to let him purchase land, no questions asked, and start what was officially listed as a coffee plantation. It was another to have real scientists, men who might actually know the difference between coca and coffee plants, wandering around near his property.

Espinosa removed his ever-present Panama hat—black today, to match his suit—and ran a hand across his face and head. Scar tissue from a long-ago explosion was rough and damp against his palm, especially the areas where his hair had only grown back in clumps of stubble. Giving the order to kill the scientists hadn't been easy. Not that he'd suddenly grown a conscience.

Taking a life meant nothing more to him now than it had back in Colombia. Safety, however, meant a great deal. Without the military and political connections he'd once had, *homocidio* was no longer something to be carried out with relative impunity. Sending a message was not an option.

Instead, he'd had his men ambush the party at night and dispose of everything—bodies, equipment, tents, all of it. When the expected government officials had come by weeks later, he'd told then he knew nothing about the scientists' whereabouts, hadn't seen them at all. He hadn't lied, either. He'd never personally met the group and he had no idea where his men had dumped the bodies.

After that, he'd posted guards along the half-overgrown trail that ran from his property past Wai Sano and all the way to the road the led to Ende, the so-called capital of Flores. At first he'd used locals, men from some of the tiny villages scattered through the jungle who were willing to work for cheap. But they turned out to be unreliable, often disappearing in the middle of a shift. That had forced him to bring in more security people from outside the island, which in turn cost him even more money. Between volcano-curious sightseers and amateur geologists, not to mention the eco-tourists who wanted to have a real back-to-nature experience in the jungles or mountains, the guards had a full-time job keeping people from approaching the

compound.

All because of a goddamn volcano. He put his hat back on and cursed the whole damn situation that had forced him to move to Flores.

Earthquakes. Hiding corpses. Extra costs before we've sold a goddamn gram. What the hell else could go wrong?

As soon as he thought it, he cursed again—at himself this time—and made a quick sign of the cross. No need to jinx things.

Not with a nervous volcano looming over them.

###

"Dude, this is freakin' amazing." Leon Fletcher stared up at Wai Sano, the top of which was hidden by a gray, dripping blanket of mist. Jungle growth climbed halfway up before eventually giving way to areas of partial clearing where naked rock showed through.

"Told you it would be." Al Loomis lifted his camera and snapped two shots of the mountain.

"Why are you bothering?" Fletcher asked, his own gear tucked safely in a waterproof camera bag hanging from his shoulder. "In this crappy light you'll get shit without a tripod."

"I just wanted to capture exactly how it looked the first

time I saw it." Loomis carefully dried the condensation from his lens and put the camera away. "Let's set up the tent and then we can scout for places to shoot this afternoon. Who knows, the weather might break and we could get a sunset."

"Don't count on it. This looks like one of those misty rains that hang around all day."

"The humidity's gonna be the big problem," Loomis said, unzipping the canvas bag with their tent in it. The two of them would barely fit inside with their gear, but neither cared. It was only for four days, and then they'd be heading back to Jakarta and a weekend of partying before returning to the states. They'd saved their money all year for the trip, with the intention of selling their pictures to National Geographic or a similar magazine, a first step in their goal of becoming globe-trotting photo journalists.

"Tell me about it." Fletcher wiped his arm across his face. He couldn't tell where his sweat stopped and the moisture in the air started. "I hope the waterproof housings we brought work as well as the guy in the store said they would."

"Yeah. Toss me that—" Frowning, Loomis stood up and stared into the near-impenetrable tropical forest.

"Toss you the what?"

"Ssshh! Did you hear that?"

"What?" Fletcher joined his partner at the edge of the

trail.

As if in response, a rustling sound came from the other side of the path.

“That!” Loomis pointed at a large stand of fernlike plants with broad leaves that blocked the view of anything that might be lurking behind them.

“Shit.” Fletcher raised the hammer he'd been holding. “What if it's a Komodo?” They were both well aware of the dangers a Komodo dragon posed due to the deadly combination of venom and bacteria the giant lizards could deliver with their powerful bite.

“We better hope it's—” Loomis broke off as more leaves and branches rustled.

Only this time it was behind them.

“Al, I don't think it's lizards,” Fletcher whispered. In the gray light his rapidly paling face stood out like a miniature moon.

Loomis opened his mouth but before any words came out, something hard struck him in the shoulder.

“Ow!” He turned to see what hit him and heard his partner cry out. Whirling back around, he saw Fletcher tumble face-down on the ground.

And then he was gone.

“Leon!” Loomis ran to where his best friend had

disappeared. Had he really seen two hands dragging him into the forest? He reached the spot where Fletcher and his body froze. He wanted to move but his muscles wouldn’t obey.

Pain exploded in the back of his head. He collapsed onto his chest, his vision filled with bright, swirling lights.

Rough hands grabbed him and turned him over.

Squinting through a multi-colored haze, he saw two sad, brown eyes staring down at him.

Then there was only darkness.

CH 4

Herve Espinosa sipped his coffee while he contemplated the fields of *coca* from his table on the shaded veranda. The black v-shapes of birds flitted from tree to tree on the perimeters of the property. A cacophony of chirps and cries and howls and screeches filled the morning air as monkeys and insects joined their feathered mates in greeting the morning. Down below, murmured voices told him the workers were already in the fields gathering this month's harvest. As long as he didn't look behind him, he could almost imagine he was still in Colombia, where he'd typically start each day with a pot of coffee and some sweet *pasteles* on his balcony before heading downstairs to his office.

Now there was no balcony, no mansion of pink and gray marble with its commercial air conditioning and gourmet chefs.

No Marta and no Hector, either.

His lips tightened into a thin line at the bitter memory of what he'd lost. Despite all the millions he'd spent on security systems and guards and bribes, it hadn't been enough, not when the rival cartels joined forces to put him out of business. They'd destroyed his house and his crops in one massive strike; he'd woken up that morning richer than nearly anyone in Colombia and gone to bed that night homeless, his wife and child dead,

his face and neck burned from explosives.

But he hadn't given up. Surrender was not in Herve Espinosa's vocabulary. And he still had his money. Surrounded by his remaining soldiers and lieutenants, he'd called in every favor he had with the *policia* and escaped to Brazil, where he'd arranged new identities for himself and his men. Then he'd had his first lieutenant, Ernesto Reyes, locate a place where he could finally be more than just another big fish in a small pond.

A place where he could be a king.

He'd had to go halfway across the world to find that place, but now it was his. The first step in building his empire.

An empire of white gold.

He wasn't foolish enough to think he had a monopoly on illegal *coca* farming in Asia. Not when he only owned two hundred acres. Enough land to produce six million dollars of *cocaina* in a year. Of course, all of that six mil didn't end up in his pocket. You had to purchase the land. Buy supplies. Pay the men and women who picked the coca leaves and processed them into powder. You had to pay bribes to the local government. Transport the goods out of country, hidden in containers of coffee beans. After all that, maybe there was two million left. If you were lucky.

Not bad, if all you wanted was to live the easy life. A

little money went a long way in Indonesia, where the cost of living was a pittance compared to Medellin or Miami.

But if you wanted to be a king?

Then you had to take that money and put it back into the business. Buy more land. Pay more bribes. Hire more men.

Herve's plan was to own the entire island of Flores in five years. Turn the jungles into a giant coca plantation. He'd already gotten a start on that, by forcing several of the local grain farmers out of business and taking over their land.

From there, he'd expand to other islands, small ones where the government could be convinced to look the other way when ships needed to get in and out, or planes needed to land.

In fifteen years, there'd be no one in all of south Asia who could compete with him. *Coca* might be the number three drug in the Orient, after heroin and methamphetamines, but having a monopoly on number three was much better than scrabbling for a share of number one in Colombia.

And much safer.

Let the triads and the Russians and the *Pemuda Pancasila* and all the others fight it out for urban territories and kill each other for control of the heroin and meth trades.

He'd supply them all equally and reap the benefits from the safety of his island paradise.

And then, when he reached a point where he was unstoppable,

he'd hire the best mercenaries money could buy and send them to Colombia to exact revenge on the *bastardos* who'd stolen his life and family from him.

First, though, he had to do something about the constant appearance of tourists and scientists near his property. He couldn't keep killing them and he couldn't turn off the volcano, which meant finding a different kind of solution.

"Ernesto." He didn't have to shout for his first lieutenant. Ernesto Reyes was always within earshot, even if you couldn't see him, unless dispatched on an assignment.

"Si, Jefe," Reyes answered from the doorway.

Herve frowned. *Jefe* meant Boss. He preferred his old title, *Generalissimo Muerte*. General Death. But part of starting a new life meant taking a new name. Here, in Indonesia, he was Alphonse Marta, in memory of his lost family. To the workers, simply *Jefe*. Someday that would change, when he had enough money and power to safely claim his rightful identity again.

"Have you completed your inspection of the grounds after this morning's tremors?" There'd been two of them, one just after sunrise and another an hour later. The first had woken Herve from a sound sleep. The second had nearly killed him in the most embarrassing of ways, slipping and falling in the shower. He'd just managed to grab the edge of the soap dish as his feet slid on the wet tiles.

"Si. I just sent them to you." Reyes pointed to the tablet next to Herve's coffee cup.

Herve slid the ultra-thin pad over and opened his email. He loved technology; one of the few good things about being in the Orient was getting the latest gadgets ahead of everyone else.

No damage. Good. "And what of the new arrivals?"

"It is as our friend in Jakarta warned. Scientists from America. There are eleven of them, plus two locals. They plan on camping near the mountain. To look for bones." Reyes' voice went sour, indicating what he thought of that concept.

"Bones? We can show them bones aplenty, eh?" Herve let out a gruff laugh that held no humor. *Más scientists. Not a good thing.* Scientists meant radios and cameras, and people with enough *inteligencia* to see through the flimsy cover story of a plantation. And possibly enough *cojones* to report it to the authorities, who would be forced to do something if they thought the scientists might go public.

"Is that what you wish, *Jefe*?"

Herve turned and looked at one man in the world who could utter that statement in a way that suggested it was not a wise decision. Reyes stood impassive. The ragged scar on his left cheek, which snaked down his neck and disappeared beneath the collar of his shirt, was a red river of pain that looked as fresh now as when he'd acquired it decades ago while haunting

the streets of Medellin, a young boy forced into thievery just to survive.

Herve had found him in the alley, his face bleeding, criss-cross wounds covering his back. He'd been whipped after getting caught stealing meat in the marketplace. Only three years older at thirteen, Herve has snuck the boy into his own bedroom and secretly shared his food and drink with him for almost two weeks while he healed.

Since then, Reyes had served as Herve's right-hand man through every step of his career, from his early days as a drug-peddling street thug to his successful coup of the Jarez cartel. Reyes was the perfect assistant: utterly ruthless, totally dedicated, and without ambition to be number one. The type of person who would have no problem taking some men to put bullets in the heads of a few scientists.

So if Reyes felt it was a bad idea to kill someone, Herve knew there had to be a reason.

"You think we should leave them alone? *Por que?*"

Reyes took a few steps into the room and shut the door. Had it been anyone else, Herve would have drawn his gun, expecting an assassination attempt. Instead, he focused his attention on the man's words.

"This is not like before." As Reyes spoke, his scar twisted and turned like a living thing attached to his flesh. "They are

not *touristas*, not *estudiantes*. They are *importante*, with expensive equipment and the backing of three governments. If they were to disappear, Flores and Jakarta would look bad. *Federales* from Australia and the United States would come. Then we would be discovered for sure."

Herve pursed his lips as he considered Ernesto's words. The last thing they needed was international law enforcement agencies snooping around.

"So, what do you have in mind?" he asked, interested in seeing how one of the most feared killers in South America would handle such a situation without resorting to violence. With bribery out of the question, what did that leave?

"If we cannot kill them, perhaps we can frighten them away. There are many volcanoes on Flores, many places to dig for rocks and bones. We simply have to convince them to go somewhere else."

"And you think you can do that?"

"Our friend in Jakarta assures me he has done this before."

"*Excellente!"* Herve pointed a finger at his second-in-command. "Take care of it today. I do not want them anywhere near our land."

Reyes nodded, but his eyes remained troubled.

"What if they do not leave?"

"Then, my friend, you will have to find a way to make them

disappear without the blame falling on us.”

For the first time in their conversation, Reyes smiled.

It was not a pleasant sight.

-They come.-

The First's eyes watered as he confirmed the worst fears of the People. There had been a brief hope that the timeline he'd seen had been in error, that the Tall Ones they had dealt with were the ones he'd seen in his dreams. That no others would arrive, and then they would only need to watch the other group of Tall Ones, the ones who grew the plants-that-stopped-sleep and who carried the weapons that killed from far.

But that hope had crumbled like dry soil in the hand when the vision returned with even more clarity.

More Tall Ones were coming. The time of the red danger was drawing nearer and the First feared all of the paths before him led to the same place.

Death.

CH. 5

"Hello, luv. Fancy meeting you here."

Annika froze at the sound of the frighteningly familiar voice behind her.

No. It can't be. Anyone else, but not him!

Except there was no mistaking that blast from her past. It might have been two years since she'd last heard it but time hadn't erased the smug, confident tones from her memory. She turned, suddenly dreading the next six weeks.

Blake Downey stood on the airport tarmac, real as the Jakarta heat.

There was only one reason for Blake to be there. He'd been chosen to lead the Australian contingent of her dig.

Damn Worthington, that lying bastard! He had to have known. Why didn't he tell her? Of course, the answer to that was obvious. If she'd found out about Blake's involvement before she arrived in Jakarta, she'd have called in every favor she had in the anthropology world to have him replaced.

Now it's too late.

He looked exactly the same as the last time she'd seen him, that morning in O'Hare airport when he said goodbye and promised to "ring her" from Sydney in a few days. Tall and lean. Shoulders as wide as the outback, thanks to years of competitive

swimming and surfing. His black hair was still long and rather unkempt, so that it constantly curtained his eyes. He wore his usual attire: an untucked Hawaiian shirt over denim cargo shorts, so different from the traditional tan khakis most field scientists preferred. And he sported the same cocky, sardonic half-smile that was as much a part of his look as his ancient hiking boots or his battered tan bush hat.

"Blake. This is a surprise. I wasn't aware you'd be joining us." Annika congratulated herself for keeping her words civil for the benefit of the other team members.

Underneath his mop of hair, one eyebrow went up. His expressions always said more than his words. This one acknowledged her still being angry with him, with a little shock tossed in that she'd been left in the dark, which he understood was pissing her off even more.

"Well. Guess someone dropped the ball, right?" His smile grew a shade more genuine and he held out his hand. "It's damn good to see you, Ann. I hope this won't be too awkward."

Too awkward? How could getting stuck in a remote jungle with my ex-boyfriend who ghosted me without any explanation be awkward? Against her better judgment, she reached out to accept his handshake.

"If we're going to have to work—"

Annika found her words torn away as Blake pulled her into a

rough bear hug. He'd always been more demonstrative than her, but even for him this was totally out of character. As were his next words, whispered into her ear.

"Jesus, Ann, I've missed you. It's so bloody good to see you again."

Then he released her and stepped back, once again wrapped in a cloak of egocentricity that was the byproduct of coming from a very well-to-do family with a fair amount of political clout.

Someone let out a cat-call whistle behind her, and Annika felt her face heating up in a way that had nothing to do with the absurdly humid air and ninety-degree temperature. One of her team members, most likely Roy Fishman. He was the only one who knew her well enough to dare do something like that.

I see a double-loaded pack in Roy's future, she promised herself.

"Let's get something straight," she said, avoiding Blake's deep blue eyes, which had a habit of distracting her to the point where she'd forget what she was saying. "This is my dig. You're here to represent the Indonesian interests. I accept that. But we're going to run this thing my way. Do you understand me, Doctor Downey?"

Instead of returning her anger, Blake's expression grew solemn. In fact, if she hadn't known him better, she'd have

sworn it almost looked...sad.

"Of course, Ann...er, *Doctor* Vahle. Me 'n my team will do our fair best to stay out of your whiskers."

He handed her a manila folder and walked away without another word, rejoining a tall, thin man with reddish hair and a matching complexion who stood watch over a pile of gear.

Oh, great. Way to over-react, Ann. Now he'll probably sulk the entire time.

Still, what had he expected? That she'd go running into his muscular arms, crying over the love she'd lost? He knew her better than that. Or at least she thought he did.

Well, time enough to worry about Blake's tantrums later. Right now, they needed to get their plane loaded for the flight to Flores. They'd been waiting over an hour for their pilot to show.

In an attempt to put Blake and the jumble of conflicting emotions his presence ignited, Annika opened the envelope. Inside were several sheets of paper listing the gear Blake and his graduate assistant, Jeff Nelson—*that must be the skinny kid*—had brought. In accordance with the arrangement Worthington had made with the Indonesian government and Charles Darwin University in Australia, Nelson would be in charge of curation, preparing any and all samples they uncovered for shipment back to the states.

Blake's specialty was hominin teeth, another potential area of tension for the two of them, since they'd both be focused on studying the same samples. Annika was well aware of his work, especially his exceptional morphological studies on the various indigenous peoples of the South Pacific. And she was certain he'd kept up with her publications as well. Considering how closely their two specialties were related, it would have been odd if he hadn't.

“Doctor Vahle?”

Annika looked up to see Butin Nasution, their contact from the Jakarta National Museum, waddling toward her. They'd met briefly the previous night and Annika had immediately mentally nicknamed him The Penguin. Short, squat, and dark as polished mahogany, he exuded an almost over-bearing friendliness. Local scientists and politicians were frequently wary, or downright hostile, of foreign teams coming in to lead organized digs. Americans especially were looked upon with suspicion, thanks in part to several instances in the 1950s and 1960s where artifacts and fossils with great cultural and historical relevance had been pilfered in the name of “science.”

Annika had been prepared to assure Nasution and any other officials that her intention was to retain any fossil remains they uncovered at Case Western for the standard period of 18 months, after which everything would be returned to the National

Museum for display. Instead, Nasution had presented a contract stating she had permission to keep anything she found for a period of two years, after which it was to be shipped to Australia's Charles Darwin University's labs. They, in turn, would also have two years to study them before returning everything for final display in Jakarta.

"Hello, Butin. What's the good word?" She prayed he'd come to tell her they were finally ready to stow their gear in the cargo plane the museum had rented for them.

"Your pilot has arrived," he said with a broad smile. "He informed me it will take perhaps two hours to load the plane, and then you are cleared to take off."

"Yes!" They'd been waiting for the pilot for more than an hour. It had gotten to the point where she thought they'd have to wait another day to reach the airport in Maumere, Flores's largest town. Now it looked like they might still finish the 600-odd mile flight with enough time left to drive to their campsite at the base of Wai Sano before the sun set.

Annika turned to her team, who were all loitering near their packs, talking, reading, or texting on their phones.

"All right, people. This is it. Time to load up!"

Cheers and pumping fists greeted her announcement. She was about to thank Nasution for all his help when the strident honking of several car horns stole her attention.

Four olive-colored Jeeps were speeding across the tarmac toward them. She was able to make out several people in each one.

"What's going on?" she asked Nasution.

He shook his head. "I do not know. Those are military vehicles."

Annika's chest tightened. Military?

"Problems, luv?" Blake's voice, behind her.

The vehicles drew close. Each Jeep held three soldiers in addition to the drivers. All of them wore green camouflage uniforms and their faces were painted in black and green stripes.

"I hope not."

The Jeeps came to a stop. The soldiers got out, automatic rifles in their hands, and formed a line two deep. One man strode forward, his eyes angry and his face pulled tight in a scowl. He wore a dark beret with a yellow eagle emblem on the front. As he approached them, he called out in deep voice.

"I am Captain Bhakti Sasmi of the Indonesian Army. Who is in charge here?"

"Uh, me." Annika raised a trembling hand. "I'm Professor Annika Vahle, from the United States."

The tall man veered toward her and stopped a few feet away. Up close, he radiated fury. A jagged scar on his forehead added

to his forbidding presence.

"You are the ones looking to dig at Wai Sano?"

Annika's anxiety grew worse. Had they broken some law? Forgotten to apply for a necessary permit? It didn't seem possible. She and Nasution had double-checked everything.

"Yes, that's correct."

Sasmi's eyes narrowed as he gave her a cruel smile.

"I am afraid I have bad news. You cannot go to the caves."

CH. 6

"That can't be right."

Annika reached for the papers the man held in his hand, but the tall soldier yanked them back.

"We are not in the habit of making mistakes when it comes to unauthorized desecration of our native lands."

"Unauthorized?" Annika shook her head. "No. We have all our papers. Mr. Nasution here filed everything himself."

She glanced at the representative only to find him wringing his hands and sweating profusely. Her stomach dropped. Had he forgotten to submit something? Or had a critical document gotten lost?

"Butin?" she asked, the rest of her question obvious but unspoken.

"Er, um, yes, yes, we have all the correct papers. If we could just see…" he motioned with a shaking hand at the ones the captain held.

"I don't care about your papers. You cannot go there."

"Why the bloody hell not?" Blake took a step forward and then stopped when Sasmi's free hand dropped to his sidearm.

"That area of the island is off-limits to the public due to volcanic activity."

"I thought you said it was because we were being accused of

unauthorized desecration." Alarms were going off in Annika's head now. She'd heard of digs in South Africa where the local police blocked the team until several bribes were paid. This was starting to look like a similar situation. With funds already stretched thin, they couldn't afford to waste money if they could avoid it.

"Let me make a call." Annika motioned for Blake to join her, more worried about his temper getting them in deeper trouble than to inform him of her plan.

Indicating he should stay silent, she dialed the number for Chahaya King's office at the National Museum of Jakarta. They'd been in touch several times since first meeting and he'd told her to call him if she needed anything while in Indonesia.

Two minutes later, she had the answers she needed and was heading back to where Sasmi waited. Her team had moved back and congregated in a tight group well away from the soldiers.

"Well?" Sasmi asked, his voice both hard and mocking. "I assume you will depart now?"

"I think not," she responded, and next to her Blake couldn't help but grin. "I believe you'll be getting a call momentarily."

Sasmi frowned, but before he could say anything, a soldier standing by one of the Jeeps shouted his name and something in Javanese. Sasmi's scowl grew deeper as he strode over and took a

large hand-held radio phone from the man.

He listened for a moment, his face darkening with each second. Then he threw the radio into the Jeep and walked back, his body stiff with barely controlled anger.

"It seems your papers are in order after all," he said, his voice tight and fire burning in his eyes. He waved his hand and the soldiers returned to their vehicles.

"Have a nice day, mate." Blake gave him a jaunty two-fingered salute and walked away, shouting at the team to start hauling their gear to the plane.

Sasmi stepped closer to Annika and lowered his voice.

"You have some powerful allies here. But you may find they are no help once you get to Flores and are alone in the forests. There are many dangers. A person can disappear very easily."

He stepped back and smiled.

"Perhaps we will meet again. Enjoy your flight."

Watching him walk to his Jeep, Annika shivered as a cold tingle worked its way down her back. His threat was obvious; the strings King had pulled would do them no good in the field. And whoever had tried to stop them from going wasn't through yet.

For the first time since planning for the trip had started, she was glad she'd followed George Latimer's advice to always have a couple of rifles at the camp and people who knew how to use them.

Her excitement at taking off dampened more than a bit, she joined her team, several of whom were staring at her with questions in their eyes. She'd have to tell them what happened, it wouldn't be fair to put them in danger unaware.

Hopefully, most of them would want to continue.

She felt a lot of pride in her choices when, after hearing the information, not a single person dropped out.

Blake then had them cheering when he said, "Fuck that wanker. Let's go make history!"

Lifting her own pack, Annika couldn't help but grin. All the delays and nasty surprises in the world meant nothing anymore.

She was about to lead her first international dig.

Two hours later, they were in the air.

"Perdón, Jefe."

Herve Espinosa looked up from his laptop screen, where he'd been watching the news out of Colombia. Something in Ernesto Reyes' voice told him his assistant did not have good news.

"What is it?"

"Sasmi and his men failed to stop the scientists from coming here. Evidently the *mujer* in charge has greater political connections than Sasmi."

A woman? Espinosa's eyebrows rose. In Colombia, it wasn't unusual for women to run cartels but for some reason he hadn't expected one to be leading a group of scientists into a steaming jungle. However, it might be something they could use to their advantage. A woman could be easier to scare off, simply because they tended to be more logical than men when it came to threats.

If she thought her people were in danger…

"Let us see if we can persuade them to do their digging elsewhere, eh? Nothing violent. But make it clear they are not welcome. Can you handle that, my old friend?"

Reyes nodded and turned to leave.

"Oh, and one other thing."

Reyes paused.

"Find out everything you can about this *mujer científica* and her people."

Annika eyed the campsite and couldn't stop a groan from escaping.

They'd arrived at the base of Wai Sano with little more than two hours to spare before dark. She'd forgotten how quickly daylight disappeared in the jungle, the trees creating a permanent canopy that trapped darkness and humidity equally well.

Two hours gave them barely enough time to set up their tents, tables, and cooking gear, let alone communications and electronics equipment. On top of that, the place was a disaster. She'd been told it was one of several officially sanctioned areas for hikers, bird watchers, and scientists to make camp and either explore Wai Sano itself or take a break before continuing on to the other parks and mountains central region of the island. According to Nasution, the location should have been fairly cleared of vegetation on both sides of the path that served as a combination road and hiking trail.

Instead, it looked like there'd been no one in the area for weeks. And in a semi-tropical jungle, that meant plenty of time for trees, ferns, and other vegetation to grow back to the point where it would take all of them wielding machetes to clear the ground before nightfall.

Not what she'd been hoping for after a bone-jarring, delay-filled drive from Maumere that left her bruised, battered, and suffering from major bladder distress.

“You're looking a might agro.”

Annika acknowledged Blake's approach with a nod but didn't turn around.

“Aggravated is putting it mildly. There was supposed to be a clearing here. Now we'll be lucky if we have half the tents up before dark.”

"It is what it is, Ann. If it makes you feel any better, they've got the dunny set up thataways."

Now she looked at him, to see where he was pointing. Dunny was Australian slang for bathroom, and she really preferred to use even a makeshift toilet rather than peeing in the bushes, when she had no idea which plants were dangerous or what animals might be lurking beneath the leaves.

"Thanks."

"No prob." He tipped his hat at her and winked. "Figured you and the other gals were in need. I remember the dance."

He did a little bounce from foot to foot with his legs held together. Annika found herself smiling and blushing at the same time. He'd called it her pee-pee dance when they'd been dating. She hadn't been aware then that she did it, and hadn't realized she'd been doing it now.

Of all the things for him to remember.

She started toward the canvas enclosure that hid a hole in the ground filled with biodegradable deodorizing chemicals.

"Be careful, luv," Blake called after her. "Don't want a dragon to snatch a bite of your bum."

She whirled around, ready to chastise him for calling her luv, but he was already walking away, calling out orders to someone to straighten their tent poles before the "whole bloody thing crashes down in the first good breeze."

"Damn him," she whispered, the mild expletive not at all satisfying. She repeated it several times on the way to the toilet, but, unlike her bladder, she found no relief from the pressure building inside her. A pressure she knew was going to blow sooner or later.

And when it did, Blake Downey better watch out.

Two sets of night-dark eyes watched from behind a cluster of hydrangea bushes as the interlopers hacked at vines and shrubs and hurried to set up tents by the light of several battery-operated lanterns. After several minutes, one of the watchers motioned for the other to follow him farther back into the forest, where their green camouflage clothing rendered them practically invisible.

"There are too many of them. Let Señor Reyes decide what to do." The man punched in a number on his cell.

"Sí?" the voice at the other end answered.

"This is Hari. The scientists have arrived. There are twelve of them."

"I understand," the voice replied. "I will tell Señor Espinosa and explain the situation to him." The connection clicked off, leaving Hari staring at his phone.

"What should we do?" his partner asked.

Hari thought for a moment and then pointed away from the

camp, where a little-used game trail would eventually lead to their SUV.

"We return to the truck and wait."

The two men eased their way through the rainforest growth, sliding between tree branches and ducking beneath vines.

Neither of them noticed they were followed all the way to their vehicle.

Ch 7

By the time Annika lowered herself into her camp chair and opened a cold can of soda, it was almost eight p.m. and full dark. They'd finally gotten the camp set up; residence tents to one side of the clearing, the two large work tents on the other, and the communal work and eating tables between them. Everyone looked as exhausted as she felt and were either sitting at tables finishing their evening meals or grumbling about the oppressive heat and humidity that hadn't gotten any better after sundown. Instead, the arriving night brought with it dense swarms of mosquitoes that even the extraordinary number of diving, swooping bats couldn't make a dent in.

Rubbing the cool can against her forehead, Annika wondered what she'd gotten herself into. It was her first time working in a jungle setting; all her previous digs had been in African savannas or the deserts of the Western US and Mexico. Despite reading up on the climate and fauna of Flores, actually experiencing the near-liquid air and oven-like temperatures was another thing entirely. If she wasn't careful, she and her team would collapse from heat stroke before their six weeks were up.

A tall, thin figure emerged from one of the tents and made its way toward her. She recognized her graduate assistant long before he passed by one of the camp lights.

“The natives are restless,” Roy said, taking a seat next to her. He was the only one of her students who'd ever been on an international dig with her before.

“They'll get used to it. It's always tough being in the field the first night.” She'd tried to alleviate some of the problems associated with travelling by having them spend two nights in Jakarta to adjust to the different time zone, and by arranging for an extra solar-powered mini-generator, despite the expense, to be used strictly for cooling water, soda, and beer. Dehydration was not something to fool around with in the jungle.

“It's not that,” Roy said. “There's no team spirit. Nobody knows each other.”

Annika started to say it shouldn't make a difference, they were all adults and all scientists, all there for the same reason, and then she paused. Roy had a point. The urgency to get a team into the field before the rainy season hit had meant filling several positions with people who’d never worked together before. And then there was the Australian contingent. Annika had been on enough digs to know camaraderie was an essential aspect of camp life. It only took one abrasive personality to create six weeks of living hell for everyone.

“Okay,” she said, and took a long sip of her soda before pushing herself back to her feet with a groan. “I guess it's time to start the party.” She walked into the center of camp and

climbed up on one of the picnic tables, which shifted a little under her weight.

Jesus, please don't let it break and dump me on my ass. That is not the way to build a reputation as a competent leader.

"Can I have everyone's attention please? Gather 'round, people." She waited while the various team members stopped what they were doing and made their way over, some smiling, some looking confused, a couple scowling as if rather annoyed at being interrupted from whatever they'd been involved in. Blake was the last to join them, moseying over from the Australian contingent's tent and taking a spot near the back of the rough semi-circle that had formed. She motioned toward him, indicating he should join her. A slight frown creasing his handsome features, he made his way to the edge of the table.

Annika remained silent for a moment, letting the whispers and muted conversations die down until the only sounds were the alien chirps and whines of birds and insects and the occasional metallic drip of moisture falling from leaves onto the tents or equipment.

"Okay, thank you. I promise I won't take long. But seeing as this is our first night here, I want to continue a little tradition I experienced on one of my first field trips."

A slight lie, but she figured no one would know.

"We're going to be living and working together for the next

six weeks, so in order to help us accomplish that, I think we should all formally introduce ourselves and tell everyone why we're here. I'll go first.

"I'm Doctor Annika Vahle. My specialties are primate cranial morphology, specifically teeth, and forensic paleoanthropology. This is my tenth field expedition. I put together this dig because a man named Chahaya King identified a piece of a jawbone from a *Homo floresiensis*, which the team at Case Western dated at less than five hundred years old. Possibly a lot less. Our goal is to try and find more bones, hopefully ones of recent origins."

There were some muttered comments she couldn't hear, and more than a few derisive smiles—all of them from people who didn't know her personally.

"I'm Dr. Bernadette Clarke," a strong voice interrupted. Everyone turned as a stocky, muscular woman in her fifties stood up. "Geology. Everyone calls me Bernie. And I can vouch for the accuracy of the carbon dating of Doctor Vahle's mandible and teeth. I was with Doctor Amar Gupta at Case Western when he ran the second set of samples. I'll be performing stratigraphic dating on any fragments we locate as well as gathering soil and rock samples for carbon dating when we return."

"There has to be contamination of the samples. Flores man disappeared thousands of years ago."

Annika glanced over at the man who'd spoken. Tall, with longish blond hair and the bronzed skin of a lifelong beach dweller. A large camera hung around his neck and he held a small digital camcorder aimed at Bernie Clarke. Devon Mackenzie, the project's official photographer. She'd met him in Jakarta but they'd had no chance to talk, mainly because he'd disappeared early each day to shoot local 'flavor' shots, as he called them. According to Roy, he'd also spent a lot of that time with a series of women in Blok M, Jakarta's red light district. He'd been hired by Nasution because he was a big name in nature photography and because he was already in town, having just completed a two-month shoot in Jakarta for National Geographic.

"Devon, please introduce yourself. We'll discuss the possible and impossible afterward."

"Right. Devon Mackenzie. Globe-trotting photo journalist extraordinaire from LA by way of London. You'll see me all over with my cameras. I'll do my best not to get in your way. And to always capture your good side."

He gave Annika a quick tip of his finger and a wink, which should have annoyed her but instead engendered a completely different feeling.

He really is quite attractive, in a California beach bum way.

"Hi, I'm, uh, Steven Webster." A short, rail-thin man of

about forty waved a shy hand. “Paleobiology. My specialty is Australian and Indonesian marsupials and mammals.” An American raised in the Netherlands, he’d been recommended to Annika by Arnie Worthington because he'd spent three years working for the National Museum in Jakarta before taking a position with Case Western. Thanks to his relationship with the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, he was doubling as the team's government liaison. He'd been invaluable in cutting through the miles of red tape that came with any international expedition. Annika had gotten the chance to spend some time with him their first night in Jakarta, at the dinner the Museum had thrown in their honor, where he'd impressed her as exceptionally knowledgeable in his field, if rather socially awkward.

Movement in the back caught her attention and she noticed Devon setting up a tripod for his camcorder. He acknowledged her gaze with another wink and a smile before going back to work.

Distracted by the photographer's quick but obvious flirtation, she only caught portions of her team's introductions. Anton Schnell, one of her four grad students. With his shaved head and large ears, he reminded her of Dr. Evil from the Austin Powers movies. He was only an average student, but strong as a bull and a hard worker. Shari Zhara, a dark-haired beauty with an amazing talent for preparing and cataloging bones. She'd most likely spend most of her time

working with Blake's assistant, Jeff Nelson. She'd also been an EMT for two years before entering graduate school. Matt Grundig was only in his first year of graduate school, but his background in auto mechanics and equipment repair made him invaluable for the team.

Finally, there was Roy Fishman, who got a round of laughter when he introduced himself as “Doctor Vahle's gofer, houseboy, and pack mule.” Despite the sarcasm, she knew he was aware of just how much she valued his talents. As the only member of the team specializing in modern primate limb morphology, he would be intimately involved in the identification of any non-cranial bones they found.

After Roy's introduction, Annika pointed at one of the camp tables.

“Rudie, please stand up.”

A teenaged boy, thin, with the dark complexion and Austronesian features that indicated he was a native of Flores. He wore a faded T-shirt and cut-off jean shorts, with leather sandals instead of shoes. When he smiled, his teeth gleamed white.

“Everyone, I'd like to introduce Rudie Sukano. Rudie and his brother Kersen found the mandible that brought us here. Kersen is only ten and couldn’t join us, but Rudie volunteered to show us the cave where they found it, and act as our guide

while we're here.”

A scattering of applause and hellos followed. Rudie gave a quick wave and then sat down.

After the camp quieted again, Blake Downey stood up. He tilted his hat back, brushed his hair from his eyes, and favored the group with a lazy smile.

“G'day, or, I guess g'night is more appropriate, eh? Blake Downey at yer service. Anthro legend, surf god, and shark boxer. I'll also be overseeing food prep, if that's all right with Doctor Vahle.” He glanced in her direction, his face expressionless.

“By all means,” she said. “Your reputation with a frying pan precedes you.”

He raised an eyebrow, surprised at the compliment.

“You have before you,” Annika said to the group, “one of the finest camp cooks I know. Enjoy it, because odds are the next time you're in the field, whoever's manning the stoves will be lucky if they can put something edible on your plate.”

A couple of people whistled or cheered, and Blake gave them a mock bow. Annika was glad he'd volunteered. She'd wanted to ask him but hadn't had the nerve. He really was a fantastic cook. She'd seen him whip up amazing meals from tins of canned meat or fish, a bag of rice, and the packets of dried spices he always brought with him on expeditions.

"I just want to thank you all for sacrificing six weeks of your—hey!" Annika suddenly found herself fighting not to fall as the table wobbled again beneath her, worse than before. She jumped down, only to find the shaking didn't stop.

"Bloody hell!" Blake grabbed her arm and held her steady while the ground continued to dance. "It's a tremor."

People shouted orders and cried out in surprise. Light poles wobbled, casting crazy shadows across the camp. Something fell with a crash, and one of the mess tent's walls collapsed. In the trees, birds and animals howled and screeched.

Then it was over as suddenly as it had begun.

The moment the vibrations stopped, Annika pulled away from Blake's hand and turned toward the dark-on-dark shape of Wai Sano rising above the trees.

No lava. No smoke.

She breathed a sigh of relief. The logical side of her brain understood that the volcano had lain dormant for millennia; despite recent geological activity that had scientists thinking it might grow active again sometime in the next hundred years or so, the odds of it happening during her six-week visit were slim to none. Any tremors they experienced were much more likely due to the frequent tectonic shifts under and around the islands, which were all volcanic in nature and sat above the intersection of several fault lines.

The side of her that had never experienced an earthquake before refused to completely believe that, however.

"Plenty of quakes here," Webster said, walking past with a can of soda as if nothing had happened. His accent was a pleasant mix of American and British. "You, uh, get used to them."

"I sure as shit hope so." Matt Grundig's voice was more annoyed than worried. Annika glanced at him and couldn't help a grin when she saw why. Yellow globs of macaroni and cheese covered the front of his shirt and pants. In one hand, he held an empty plastic dish.

"Is everyone else all right?" Blake called out.

"Anything broken?" Annika added, remembering the crash she'd heard.

Voices replied in the affirmative to Blake's question. Danny Chen held up his arm.

"All the fragile stuff's still in the cases. But we lost one of the lamps."

"We can live with that. Okay, everyone, hopefully the excitement's over for the night. Let's straighten things up and then get some sleep. We've got an early day tomorrow."

The team rose and began picking up fallen objects and tossing away garbage from dinner. Annika smiled to herself when she saw Jeff Nelson, Shari Zhara, and Danny Chen all working

together to right the fallen mess tent.

Nothing builds teamwork like a natural disaster.

"Guess your speech inspired them," Blake said. She jumped a little; she'd forgotten he was there.

"We'll see how inspired they are this time tomorrow, after a day of hiking and scouting the caves in this heat."

"Fair dinkum to that. Join me for a nightcap?"

Annika almost said yes. She recognized the gesture as a peace offering. But she also felt the last of her energy slipping away, and knew if she stayed up another hour, she'd be useless in the morning."

"Rain check," she said, and then experienced an unexpected twinge of regret when she saw the way his face hardened. He gave a curt nod and strolled away, leaving her standing alone and wishing she'd softened her refusal with a touch of her hand or a smile.

I'll apologize tomorrow. Except even as she made the promise, she knew there'd be a fifty-fifty chance he'd do something to annoy her before she got around to it.

Shaking her head at the complexities of relationships, both past and present, she headed for her tent, crossing mental fingers for a less stressful—and less humid—tomorrow.

Ten seconds after she crawled into her sleeping bag, all thoughts disappeared as exhaustion claimed her.

Ch 8

At just past ten in the morning, Annika's legs screamed for a rest and she called for the group to take a break, even though they were only halfway to the cave where Rudie and his brother had made their discovery.

“Let's take five,” she said, pointing to a spot where the trail widened a bit. “Everyone make sure to drink some water. I don't want anyone getting dehydrated.”

“Yes, mother,” Blake said, giving her a wink as he strode by. She flipped her middle finger at him, glad she still had the energy to do it.

They'd been woken just before dawn by another tremor. On the heels of that had come a fifteen-minute rain shower, which not only added to the already oppressive humidity but turned the trail leading to Wai Sano into a precarious, muddy route that alternately clutched at their boots or had them slipping and sliding.

The half-mile hike to the base of the volcano seemed like more like two miles and left everyone drenched in sweat. It was actually a relief of sorts to begin climbing the side of the mountain, where the sparser growth allowed a mild breeze to reach them and the rocky soil provided firmer footing.

After using her already filthy bandana to wipe away a crust

of sweat and grime, Annika made her way to where Rudie was helping Bernadette Clarke gather soil samples.

"How much farther to the cave?" she asked the boy, slightly embarrassed by her lack of stamina. Back home, she went to the gym regularly. Sure, she'd expected hiking in the rainforest to be arduous, what with the heat and humidity, but this was ridiculous.

"Two, three kilometers," Rudie said, giving her one of his broad smiles. The sauna-like conditions didn't seem to affect him at all. He'd spent most of the morning scrambling ahead of the team, chasing small monitor lizards off the path and pointing out birds and butterflies for Devon Mackenzie to photograph.

"Easy from here," he continued. "See the clouds?" He gestured up the trail. Not too far above them, gray mists wove between rocks and trees, gradually growing thicker until they blocked the top of the volcano from view.

"More rain?" The idea of getting soaked again had her thinking maybe they should have worn bathing suits.

"No rain. Sky blue!" Rudie rolled his eyes and laughed. "Cooler there. You like."

Cooler? That sounded fine to Annika, who nodded and told Bernadette they'd be moving on in a couple of minutes. Then she went to inform the rest of the group, which also included Roy

Fishman and Shari Zhara. Danny Chen had stayed behind, to set up a more secure, rainproof enclosure for the computer equipment, while Steven Weber had taken a different path with Matt, Anton, and Blake's assistant, Jeff. Rudie had told them it led to some small caves where they might find fossils of strange birds and animals.

"Big birds," he'd told them, raising his hand high above his head. "Tiny elephants." His hand went down to his knee.

Weber's eyes had lit up and he'd headed for his tent muttering excitedly about extinct marabou storks and pygmy elephants.

"Not exactly Omo, is it, luv?"

Annika smiled at Blake's comment, a reminder of the two months they'd worked together in Africa, both of them fresh out of grad school and excited as all hell to be digging for hominin fossils under a sweltering savannah sun. Temperatures had reached one hundred every day, with no clouds or trees to provide any escape from the brutal rays.

And she'd loved every minute of it.

What not to love? She'd been young and doing the one thing she'd dreamed of since she'd been a little girl. What was a little heat compared to that? Back then, she'd barely noticed the uncomfortable days.

Plus, she'd fallen head over heels for Blake. And he for

her. Or so she'd thought.

"I'll bet if we went there today, we'd feel just as shitty as I do right now," she said, taking another sip of water. A small one, because she'd already finished half her canteen. *Conserve,* she reminded herself. *You've still got a long day ahead.*

"Getting old sucks." Blake gave her a big wink. "Lucky it hasn't happened to me yet." With that, he hefted his pack and shouted for everyone to "get their arses in gear, time's a wasting!"

Not sure whether to laugh or hate him for his energy, Annika hoisted her own pack, which seemed to have doubled in weight, and forced her aching legs to move.

It damn well better be cooler in that mist.

In the darkness of the Peoples' cave, the First looked at the others as they listened to the warnings from the scouts.

—Tall Ones approach.—

—They are on both sides of the angry mountain.—

It was as the First had feared. The Tall Ones were never satisfied with what they had. Always, they wanted more and more. More land, more food, larger shelters. Instead of taking just what they needed, they grabbed as much as they could hold.

Sometimes more. And then destroyed the rest with their blades and fires.

The First sighed. No matter how much things had changed since the long ago times, one thing remained the same.

The Tall Ones meant danger.

-One of them is the stealer of bones.-

Several of the others expressed anxiety at this unexpected news. They had allowed the stealer of bones to leave their lands unharmed because he and his brother were young and they had not entered the Cave of the Elders. But now he had brought more Tall Ones with him...

—What if they disturb those who went before?—

The First considered this new problem. Certain things could not be allowed. But to risk discovery was also taboo.

At times like this, he wished someone else was the First. That the heavy weight of decisions did not rest on his shoulders. Such was not the case, though, and while he had the knowledge of the Elders to aid him, in the end it was he who must carry the burden of responsibility for choosing the correct path for the People.

—We will let them come. Perhaps they will only dig in the ground again and then leave.—

This was the First's hope. The tribe would leave their homes until the Tall Ones left; a night or three hiding in the

forest was preferable to confrontation. Many times Tall Ones had come, dug their holes, and gone away with rocks and plants. Never had any of the tribe been seen.

But they would also watch the Tall Ones carefully. Because if they disturbed the resting places of the Elders...

Then punishment would be swift.

The People nodded and murmured their agreement.

—Punishment.—

Annika wiped her arm across her face, a gesture that provided only a temporary clearing of moisture from her eyes. At first, the cooling mists promised by Rudie had been a godsend, drawing the excess warmth from their super-heated bodies. As they'd ascended farther, though, the mists continued to thicken, to the point where the vapors were now collecting on skin and clothing and running down foreheads in rivulets that stung the eyes and tickled the lips. Not to mention the annoying stream flowing between her breasts.

The fog also presented an unexpected danger. It made the rocks slicker than ever, forcing everyone except Rudie to walk in pairs, ready to provide a steadying hand or arm when a foot slipped.

"It's going to be bloody fun traipsing up and down this

bugger with tools and supplies, now, isn't it?” As he spoke, Blake took off his hat and shook a spray of droplets from it.

Annika nodded. “I know we usually try to preserve what we find on location, but I think we might be better off just wrapping things and carrying them back down to camp. We can leave our tools in the cave at night.”

“Sounds good to me. I don't fancy walking down this hill with a ton of plaster on my back.”

“We can rotate the grad students,” Annika said. “That way they'll all get a chance to dig, and they'll all learn how to prepare samples for shipping,” she added, referring to the standard technique of wrapping bones in plaster and burlap for protection. The heavy bundles would then be painstakingly cut open and chipped away back in Annika's labs when they returned to the States.

“No fond memories of that.” Blake shook his head, sending more drops through the air.

“What, you didn't enjoy spending your days covered in plaster and then half the night scraping it off?”

“Damn near took all the hair on my arms with it,” he grumbled.

“Baby.” She gave him a punch on the shoulder, was rewarded with his face lighting up in a smile. He opened his mouth to reply, but Rudie’s shout from ahead of them cut off his words.

"Cave right here!"

Annika felt her heart speed up. This was it!

"Race you." Without waiting for a reply, Blake increased his speed to a jog, and Annika experienced a moment of embarrassment as she realized he'd been faking his own fatigue just so she didn't feel like the only one who was out of shape.

Bastard! She tried to pick up her pace, but her feet only ended up slipping even more, forcing her to slow down again.

The trail lightened up ahead and then she emerged through the layer of mist. Above her, a brilliant blue sky provided a beautiful backdrop to the rest of the peak that rose above them. The mist thinned out at around waist level. The rest of the team waited in a cluster and she shot Blake an angry glare. He answered with a wink, letting her know he understood her frustration at being the last to arrive.

"Wait 'til you see this, luv. It's amazing."

Annika moved forward, slipping in between Danny and Bernadette to get her first look at Rudie's cave. The moment she saw it, she wanted to shout. Blake was right. It was amazing. No, it was more than that.

It was perfect.

CH 8

To the untrained eye, the cave would appear to be simply an ordinary cavern. If there is such a thing. To Annika, it was as if the gods of paleontology had granted all her wishes for what a place of discovery should be.

The dampness of the mist extended into the wide, tall space, creating an atmosphere not wet enough to muddy the floor or dissolve fragile bone, but with just enough moisture to keep the layers of volcanic ash soft enough to dig up with a shovel instead of a pick. It also meant they wouldn’t need to worry about fossilized samples being encased in rock, which always added a level of danger; you could break or even shatter a valuable find with one wrong tap of a hammer.

The cave itself was enormous, expanding from a mouth of ten or twelve feet across to a space as wide as Annika's laboratory at Case Western, and so deep their flashlights couldn't penetrate all the way to the back. Channels and gullies, a few several inches deep, indicated that on at least some occasions, water flowed through the cave during rain storms.

“It's an old lava tube or bubble,” Bernadette said, aiming her light at one of the walls. The yellow glow revealed rough, black stone with glittering pieces of darker, reflective material scattered through it. “Basalt and obsidian.”

The geologist set down her pack and began laying out her sampling kits. Although the trip to the cave was only supposed to be a preliminary survey to determine how they would set up their digging grids and schedules, Annika understood the woman's eagerness to get started right away. If she could have, she'd have begun digging herself.

“There's a nice, thick layer of ash on the floor, that's for sure,” said Roy Fishman, poking a stick into the soil.

“Hold on a minute.” Devon Mackenzie motioned for the group to stand together just inside the cave’s entrance. “A shot for posterity.”

The flash exploded twice, leaving Annika with red and blue spots in her vision. She had to rub her eyes several times to clear them.

“All right, let's get started. Roy, you and Shari will be in charge of laying out the initial grids. Blake, you and I will move ahead, deeper into the cave. Before we do anything, though, Rudie, can you show me exactly where you and Kersen found the bones?”

“Sure, real close. Follow me!” Holding his flashlight out like a sword, the wiry boy guided them along a small gully, less than two feet wide and only two or three inches deep. About twenty feet in from the entrance, he stopped and pointed down at a roughly circular area where the ground had been dug up.

"Right there. Lucky I saw it. Very tiny. This much sticking out of ground." Kersen held his fingers barely an inch apart.

"Lucky for sure," Blake said, kneeling down and brushing at the dark soil with his hand. It came up easily, crumbling in a way that reminded Annika of the thick, rich farm soils of her native upstate New York rather than the hard, heavily packed floors of other caves she'd been in.

"Mighty fine digging here, luv." Blake let a handful of black earth fall through his fingers. "At least we won't be busting our arses, eh?"

He stood up and brushed his hands across his shirt, unmindful of the dark streaks he left behind on the wild floral print. She'd always admired that about him; Blake came across as a pretty boy, with his touseled hair and Hawaiian shirts. But he had no problem getting dirty.

In the field or in the bedroom, her mind added, and she hurried to think about something else before other memories surfaced.

"Well, let's see what the rest of the cave has to offer." She turned away so he couldn't see her face, aiming her flashlight deeper into the Stygian depths.

"Righteeyo. Lead the way."

Annika strode forward, pleased that he hadn't automatically taken the lead. Maybe they'd be able to work together after all.

It wasn't until they'd walked several yards that she remembered who she was dealing with and understood why he was following her.

He wanted to stare at her ass.

She stopped short and heard a soft chuckle.

“Caught on to me, didja? All right, no more games.” He moved up beside her and waved his flashlight forward. “Go on. Let's see where this leads.”

“Wait.” Annika held up her hand. She'd caught a glimpse of something ahead, a discoloration in the cave floor. “Up there. On the ground.”

“Spotted yourself a souvenir rock?” Despite his comment, Blake joined her in playing his light back and forth, the twin yellow cones sweeping through the total blackness like searchlights in a starless night sky.

“There!” She'd seen it again. This time it only took a second to move her light back slowly until it captured the object.

“That's no rock,” Blake said, his voice rising in excitement, as they both hurried toward the object. Annika didn't bother replying. She'd already recognized it.

A stone blade.

Annika reached it a step ahead of Blake and grabbed it.

“Shine the light closer.” She held the triangular shape up,

holding it between two fingers and her thumb. The light accentuated the uneven surface, turning the chips and furrows into miniature craters and gullies so that it resembled a distant view of the moon. The base was only slightly wider than the tip, the sides curving toward the point rather than running in straight lines. Roughly four inches long, one side narrowed to a much thinner edge than the other, so that it could be held safely while cutting meat or plants.

Blake let out a low whistle. “Look at you. Not even ten minutes and you've already got yourself a prize. A real beaut, she is.”

“We're going to have to extend our grid,” Annika said, turning the blade over in her hand.

“And our assumptions.” Blake aimed his light down to where the artifact had lain. “Look at the ground.”

Annika reluctantly set the blade down and took up her own flashlight. She scanned the area, wondering what had piqued Blake's attention.

“I don't see anything.”

“That's because you're looking for the wrong thing. See here,” he wiggled the light in front of her boots, then moved it fifteen feet or so to their right. “And here. Notice anything?”

Using her own light, Annika aimed the beam back and forth several times, comparing the two parts of the cave floor.

Same soil, same lack of signs that anyone had previously dug there... The only difference was...

“Shit.” She couldn't believe she'd missed such an obvious detail. Worse, it pissed her off that Blake noticed it before her.

“Aha, the light bulb goes off,” Blake said, raising one eyebrow at her.

“It wasn't in any of the drainage areas.” Annika took out a tape measure and extended it to the nearest channel. “Thirteen feet. That means the blade wasn't uncovered by erosion.”

“Which leaves only two possibilities.” Blake held up two fingers. “One, someone found it somewhere else and dropped it here. Or two...”

“It's so new it never had a chance to get buried.” Annika couldn't quite keep her rising excitement from her voice. “Do you realize this might only be a hundred years old, like the bones Kersen—”

“Hold on a minute, luv. Don't get all rockers. I was gonna say, two, somebody's playing a funny on us. That chopper can't have been sitting there for a hundred years, or even five.”

“What?” Annika picked up the artifact again. “It's sure as hell not a fake. I've studied all the implements they found in Liang Bua. These markings are too similar to be a replica.”

Blake nodded. “I've studied them, too. Your trinket there

is definitely real. It just couldn't come from here."

Tired of Blake's evasiveness, Annika let some of her frustration show. "And why the hell not?"

"Because it's clean. And if you weren't so all-out, fired-up determined to prove your ancient abos lived here recently, you'd have noticed it yourself. The damn thing doesn't even have any dust on it."

"You're saying it was planted?" Annika examined the stone blade again, and then her fingers. Hardly a trace of dirt. How could she have not noticed that?

Because Blake's right. You're letting your hopes of a ground-breaking discovery cloud your logic. Get your head on straight, girl!

"Why?" she asked aloud, while reviewing the possibilities in her head. Blake voiced them at the same time.

"The usual suspects. Fame, tourism, maybe even jealousy."

Annika's lips tightened. The history of paleontology and anthropology were littered with examples of hoaxes. Piltdown Man, the lost city of Uluru, the Cardiff giant. Voices from behind them turned her attention in the direction of their team.

"Do you think it was Rudie?" She hated the thought; the boy was so open and friendly. But then, kids tended to be kids, no matter where in the world you were. Who knew what Rudie and his teenage friends might think is funny, like playing a prank on

some foreign scientists.

Blake shrugged. “Not likely. And we know the jaw you got was real enough for sure. P’raps Nasution? Or that Hari fellow,” he added, referring to a government aid who’d helped them obtain their vehicles and supplies. “He struck me as kind of dodgy.”

“But for what purpose? A hoax would eventually be discovered. And that would be as big a black eye for the Indonesian government as for us.”

“Would it?” Blake moved closer and his voice dropped to a whisper. “Think about it, luv. You’re the one in charge. A woman, from the US of A. Something like this would make you and Case Western look damn bad, and it wouldn’t exactly do wonders for my rep, either. We’d be bloody disgraced, to be honest. The jaw would have to be returned, along with anything else we find. And then a team from Jakarta comes out here, with the prep work all done, and hits the motherload.”

It made sense, much as Annika didn’t want to admit it. She’d heard stories from her professors, from other scientists on digs, about the in-fighting and envy that happened in academics and research. Renowned figures casting aspersions on each other, or on finds, just so their own theories weren’t discredited. Or because they wanted their name in the spotlight. Even if it meant throwing someone else under the bus.

Well, it wasn’t going to happen to her. From now on she’d

keep her eyes open and her emotions in check.

"Right. So let's do this by the book." She placed the blade where she'd found it and used her phone to snap some pictures. Then she quickly dictated a brief description of the find, noting the lack of dust and the location, and her suspicion it had been placed their intentionally. Finally, Blake used a tiny can of white spray paint to mark the spot where it had been found. Later, either Roy or Jeff would enter the finding in the database they were keeping, and on the grid map.

"Don't let it ruin the day, luv," Blake said, noting her soured mood as they rejoined the others. "We've still got a fair chance of making a big splash here. Remember, it might not be new, but it still had to come from somewhere around here."

"You're right." Annika took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. Let someone try to discredit her. They'd be sorry they messed with Annika Vahle.

"Everyone, gather 'round. I've got something to show you."

Many yards deeper in the cave, beyond the faintest glow from the flashlights, three pairs of large, round eyes watched as the team began marking the floor in squares for excavation.

CH 9

"I thought all the samples of *Homo floresiensis* were discovered in limestone caves."

Annika put down her peanut butter sandwich and glanced at Danny Chen. The entire team—with the exception of Matt Grundig, who'd remained back at camp to try and repair the broken light—had gathered at the entrance to the cave for a lunch break. As Rudie predicted, a cool breeze, combined with the last vestiges of the fog, alleviated much of the sun's heat.

They'd spent most of the morning laying out their grids and exploring the enormous space, which turned out to be not one cave but a series of them, with numerous branches and tunnels. Fearing someone might get lost, Annika had placed yellow tape at the back of the main cavern, where the first split occurred, with instructions to everyone not to go any farther.

"Good point." Annika was glad to see Danny had caught up on his reading. "They were. The first specimens came from Ling Bua, west of here, near a small river. That team eventually dug up remains of nine different individuals."

"A joint Australian-American team, just like this one," Blake added. "Let's hope that means good luck."

"You were saying about limestone caves." Bernadette's voice. Annika rubbed her eyes and squinted. The stocky geologist

was just a silhouette with the early afternoon sun as a backdrop.

"Yes." Annika paused to regain her place in her story. "Caves. Right. The bones they found weren't preserved at all, despite being more than twelve thousand years old. In fact, when the scientists picked up the first ones, they crumbled from all the moisture they'd been exposed to. The others had to be dried and preserved on site before they could be wrapped and transported."

"So why aren't we looking for new specimens there?" asked Shari.

"Other than the unheard of young age of the bones and teeth Master Rudie found right here?" Blake asked with a wry smile, reminding the grad student of the reason for their expedition.

"Yes," Shari said, with no trace of embarrassment. "I understand we need to search here because of what was found here. Why didn't we split into two groups, one for this cave and one for the limestone caves? After all, history's already shown that *H. floresienses* occupied that habitat for thousands of years. If there really are any living members of their species still alive, wouldn't at least some of them be on that same mountain, or at least in that same area?"

"That's an excellent question. Mister Fishman, can you answer it?" Annika stared at Roy, taking a perverse pleasure in

his sudden discomfort at being put on the spot.

"Consider this a rehearsal for your final exam," she added, giving him an exaggerated wag of her eyebrows.

To her left, Blake tried to cover a snicker of laughter by coughing into his hand.

"Um, well, because..." Roy looked at Blake, his eyes pleading for help.

"Sorry, mate." Blake gave an exaggerated shrug. "You're on your own. Hope for your sake you know your stuff. Or that you can pants it bloody well."

Roy bit his lip and cleared his throat. He glanced at Shari, whose impassive expression seemed to only make his anxiety worse. He rubbed his hand across his bald head and tugged at his goatee. It dawned on Annika that he had something of a crush on Shari and failing in front her was doubly embarrassing him. Had she known, she might not have put him on the spot, but it was too late now.

"Okay, I don't know." Roy looked down at his muddy boots.

"The trick is to put yourself in their shoes. It's the same reason we don't still live in caves, the reason mankind left the savannah and expanded around the world." Annika spread her arms. "One of the hallmarks of any *Homo* species is their ability to adapt when conditions change."

"What changed?" Bernadette asked. "The caves there are

geologically stable. Moreso than here, actually."

"We showed up," Annika said. "*Homo sapiens*. In droves. First we spread from one island to the next, reducing their habitat. And then modern civilization sprang up around them. Flores island is mostly natural parks and beaches. Which means a lot of towns, tourist hotels, and roads have been built. The local tribes are shrinking to almost nothing, the farmers are losing their lands. Can you imagine what it was like for a primitive race that didn't even have fire? An indigenous species that wanted to avoid contact with humans would retreat to the most inhospitable areas of the island."

"Coincidentally, the same areas where tales of tiny jungle people with supernatural powers are still spoken about among the native populations," added Blake.

"So, you're saying the hobbit people moved to these caves to remain hidden after modern humans started to take over the island?" Shari asked.

"Well, we don't refer to them as hobbits. That's just the media's name for them. But yes, it makes sense that environmental pressure would lead to a change in habits. Think about it. A race of tiny people that survived by hunting giant lizards and birds and rodents, as well as the dog-sized elephants native to the islands. Then, around fifty or sixty thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* comes along, taller and

stronger, and with greater numbers. They hunt the birds and elephants to extinction, and probably their fair share of *H. floresiensis* as well. Faced with dwindling food supplies and aggressive neighbors, Flores Man, as a race, gets forced into smaller and smaller territories, until one last tiny group remains, hidden deep in the jungle halfway up a volcano."

"The Lao Ho'a," whispered Rudie.

"The what now?" Devon snapped a shot of the boy and then turned on his video camera.

"Lao Ho'a. The magic little people. Some tribes call them Ebu Gogo, the magic grandfathers, because they were here long before we came." He waved his arm to indicate all of them, his meaning clear. Humans.

"I've heard that story," Blake said. "According to the local legends, the Ebu Gogo are a race of small, hairy cave folk that lived here and on some of the surrounding islands. There are mentions of them as far back as the sixteenth century, when the first Portuguese ships landed. But locals claim to have seen them as recently as a couple of hundred years ago."

"Sounds like a walking, talking version of the Tasmanian wolf." Devon turned the camera toward Blake.

"The thylacine, yes." Annika nodded at Devon's analogy, then winced as the flash momentarily blinded everyone. But Rudie shook his head.

"Ebu Gogo don't talk. Silent people."

"Silent?" Jeff Nelson frowned. "I've never heard that part of the legend before."

"Nah, lad's deadest righto." Blake spoke around a mouthful of sandwich. "Little buggers supposedly muttered in their own language, whispers mostly, but they could imitate words people spoke."

"Ebu Gogo have magic powers," Rudie said, as if he hadn't heard Blake. "Able to fly. To disappear. Turn people to stone. My people were farmers before they moved to town. Some still are. In the villages, the *ata bhisa*—"

"The who?" interrupted Jeff.

"The local medicine man or seer," whispered Devon, indicating Rudie should keep talking.

"They say the Ebu Gogo still here. People afraid of them. Seeing one is bad luck."

"If they're still around, or they were until recently, why hasn't anyone seen them in modern times?" asked Shari.

"Local legends are highly inaccurate," Annika reminded her. "And our ability to date recent specimens isn't much better. It's generally agreed that *H. floresiensis* has been extinct for at least twelve thousand years. But that's a rough date. When did the last one really die? Ten thousand years ago? A thousand? Five hundred? All we know for certain is that Flores Man

flourished on this island thirty to forty thousand years ago, and was still here when *Homo sapiens* moved in. People on Flores, and some of the surrounding islands, will tell you their ancestors would still occasionally encounter mysterious little people right up to the early eighteen hundreds."

"People around the world also see Bigfoot," Roy Fishman said, with a snicker.

"But if that jaw Rudie found is real—"

"Very real," Rudie spoke over Bernie's words.

"—then all those stories could be true as well."

"And that, my friends, is why we're halfway up a volcano and not at Ling Bua," finished Blake.

"Speaking of which, time we got back to work." Annika stood up and brushed crumbs off her lap. Good natured groans greeted her pronouncement. "Finish the first set of grids and I'll convince our chef to make something special tonight."

"I'll make something even more special if you don't finish. Got a banger of a recipe for roasted monitor lizard I've been wanting to give a go."

"Back to work!" Roy jumped to his feet and pulled Shari up with him. From the way she leaned against his arm, Annika had a feeling her assistant's affections weren't one-sided.

Let's hope it doesn't become a problem. Field romances were notoriously flammable. She'd learned that the hard way. Her

thoughts caused her to glance at Blake. She found him staring right at her, the faintest of smiles tugging his lips.

It's like he's psychic. She turned away and pretended to check the layout of the grids again, while doing her best to ignore the embers warming her own chest. And lower.

It's nothing. Just some leftover sexual attraction, same as with any ex. I—

"Hey." Annika jumped as a hand came down on her shoulder. She turned, ready to berate Blake for invading her personal space.

Instead, she found herself staring into Devon Mackenzie's crystal blue eyes. Eyes that reminded her of Blake's.

Stop it!

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you, luv." His hand remained on her arm for several seconds longer than necessary before he stepped back.

"That's, um, okay. Did you need something?" Her face grew warm under his intense gaze but she couldn't look away.

"I was hoping I could get some pics of you at the entrance to the cave, with your team working in the background. And then maybe a couple the other way, with the jungle behind you."

"Well, it's really a team effort, not about me—" Looking past Devon, she saw Blake frowning in their direction. He'd noticed the photographer's decidedly unsubtle flirtation.

"—but I suppose a few shots wouldn't hurt. Where would you like me?"

Devon's smile grew wider. It took Annika a moment to understand why, and she immediately regretted her choice of words.

"We can discuss that later, eh? For now, let's have you standing there, with the grids behind you. And then each day we can snap a few in the same spot, mark the progress if you will."

"Like this?" Annika struck her best scholarly pose. Blake's scowl deepened and she knew she'd gotten to him.

Too bad. He had his chance. There's nothing wrong with me enjoying the attention of another man.

So how come it felt like a betrayal?

Matt Grundig checked his watch. Still at least two hours before the crew was due back from the cave. With a self-satisfied smile, he lit a cigarette, opened a can of cold soda, and settled into a camp chair next to the tent he shared with Danny Chen.

"Here's to me," he said, toasting himself with the soda. "A job well done."

He'd spent hours repairing the broken camp light and running diagnostic tests on the other equipment. Luckily, nothing else had been damaged in the quake, or they'd have been

shit out of luck. He'd packed as many spare parts as they could carry but some of the equipment, such as the ground-penetrating radar and the magnometer, were too complex to repair in the field if any of the electronics got broken.

He rested the can on his forehead. Even that didn't do much to alleviate the unbearable heat. What he really needed was a nice cold shower. Or even a lake or ocean to dive into. But the only bodies of water nearby were swamps or muck-filled streams, and the showers used collected rainwater, which was tepid at best.

The sounds of muted whispers interrupted his reverie. He opened his eyes, thinking Danny or Roy had returned from the cave early and were trying to sneak up on him.

"Nice try! I hear you." Matt looked around but couldn't see anyone. Had the sounds come from the trees or behind one of the tents? He stood up. More whispers, this time behind him. When he turned, the camp still appeared empty.

"Not funny, guys." It had to be both of them, one on each side. A muffled thump. He whirled toward the main tent. If they thought this was funny, he'd...

Pain exploded in the back of his head and he fell, his vision clouded by bright lights. Strong hands gripped his ankles and through the ringing in his ears he heard more whispers.

Then the world disappeared.

CH 10

"Bloody fucking hell."

Blake stopped so fast that Annika ran into his back. She was about to say something when she saw why he'd halted so suddenly.

The camp was in shambles.

Collapsed tents lay in wrinkled piles. Two of them had gaping holes in their sides. The light poles were on the ground. The tables were overturned. Equipment was strewn everywhere. Supplies had been scattered across the small clearing.

Gasps and curses sounded behind her as the rest of the group joined them and noticed the damage.

"Holy shit." Danny let out a whistle. "Another earthquake? How come we didn't feel it?"

"Not an earthquake." Matt emerged from one of the few tents that hadn't been completely knocked down. He held a bloody rag to the back of his head.

"Oh!" Shari rushed forward and grabbed him by the arm. She led him to a nearby table and eased him down. "Are you okay?"

Matt nodded and then winced as she removed the cloth. Annika went over and caught sight of a massive lump behind his ear. "Somebody find the first aid kit," she said. Roy and Danny immediately began searching through the mess.

"Matt, what happened?" Annika knelt down next to the equipment specialist.

"Someone whacked me from behind. Never saw them. Heard them, though. Ow!" He flinched as Shari cleaned the wound with an alcohol pad. "More than one. In the bushes. I went to see what the noise was and wham. Woke up and the camp looked like this." He shook his head. "Sorry, Dr. Vahle. Guess I'm not much of a guard."

"Stop thinking like that. We didn't expect this kind of trouble out here. Shari, how bad is it?"

"He'll be fine. A cut, a lump, maybe a minor concussion. He'll have a headache." She took a disposable cold pack from Roy, who'd found the first aid kit, and twisted it to activate the coolant inside. She placed it on his head and told him to hold it there.

Annika went over to where Rudie stood off to the side, taking in everything with wide eyes.

"Is this something people from one of the villages might do? Maybe they're angry at us for exploring the caves?" She made sure to keep her voice calm and friendly, although all she wanted to do was scream at the world.

Rudie shook his head. "No. Villagers keep to themselves. Not hurt anyone. And people from town like tourists, like scientists more. They buy lots of things from us. Good for

everyone."

"Well, someone doesn't like us," Steven Webster said.

"Ebu Gogo," Rudie whispered.

"What?"

"Ebu Gogo. Maybe they are angry we on their land."

Blake approached them with a piece of paper in his hand and the angriest look Annika'd ever seen on his face.

"Unless your Ebu Gogo can write, I think we cross them off the list of suspects."

He handed the paper to Annika. Three words were printed on it in scrawling letters.

Go Home Pelanggar

"Pelanggar? What the hell does that mean?" The rest of it was pretty self-explanatory. Someone didn't want them there.

Devon peered over her shoulder.

"It's Bahasa for trespassers."

"So it is someone on the island. Probably in town." Annika crumpled the paper in her fist. First thing tomorrow she'd drive there and visit the police. Then—

"Er, p'raps not." Everyone turned to look at the photographer. "It's true that people in town speak Bahasa, at least some of them. It is one of the two main languages of Indonesia, right? But on Flores, and some of the other dinky islands, there's a lot of dialects."

"You don't think someone from here would use that word?"

Devon shrugged and lit a cigarette. "Maybe they would, maybe they wouldn't. Or p'raps this is the work of someone we know speaks Bahasa. A certain military bloke who didn't get his way."

Annika cursed.

Sasmi. She should've guessed. He was the only one who'd given them trouble since arriving in Indonesia. And he'd basically threatened them before they left Jakarta. Why he wanted them gone so bad she had no idea. But he wasn't going to get rid of her that easy. She'd have a talk with Nasution, let him know what happened. Maybe he could even send a couple of guards. And she'd let the police in town know, too.

In the meantime…

"All right. I'll take care of this in the morning. Right now, let's straighten up as best we can for tonight, eat something, and then tomorrow we get to work."

Mackenzie bobbed his cigarette in her direction.

"Not the sort of gal to get pushed around, eh? I like that." He gave her a wink and wandered off. Blake glared at him as he passed, looked like he was going to comment, and then shook his head. Leaning close to Annika, he lowered his voice.

"Be a good idea to set up a watch tonight. Nothing too obvious, don't wanna scare the young'ns. Me, Fishman, and my guy

Nelson. Whattya think?”

Annika bit her lip. She’d been on digs in dangerous areas of Africa where two armed guards patrolled the camp all night. She hadn’t wanted that kind of atmosphere for her first time in charge. But it made sense. Better safe than sorry.

“Okay, but count me in, too. Two hours each, four of us, that means everyone gets a good night’s sleep still.”

To his credit, Blake didn’t argue, just gave her a little grin as if he’d expected her to volunteer. They set up the schedule, with Annika taking first shift. Blake headed over to speak with Roy and Jeff Nelson, leaving Annika to wonder if he was finally maturing or if the wrecking of the camp had just temporarily dampened his free-living attitude.

Bright light flashed from a few yards away and she looked over. Mackenzie stood there, grinning ear to ear, his camera pointed right at her. He gave her a thumbs up and a wink, then strolled away.

Annika couldn’t imagine why he’d wanted a picture right then. It was only later, when she was in her tent changing out of her field clothes into sweats, that she noticed two of her blouse buttons had come undone at some point during the hike back to camp. She groaned, imagining the caption for that photo.

‘Dr. Annika Vahle makes paleoanthropology sexy.’

Heat rose up in her face at the thought of Mackenzie

looking at the picture and thinking the same thing.

Mackenzie. Blake. They were more similar than different, with their looks and their attitudes.

She mentally scolded herself.

Focus on the work.

Easier said than done, though. Maybe her friend Cassie back home had been right when they were out for drinks a couple of months ago. Maybe she did need to get laid. It would take the edge off, allow her to concentrate. And Devon Mackenzie was really the perfect choice. No emotional attachment, just taking care of a physical need.

No!

Not this trip. She wouldn't make that mistake again. And certainly not with one of the team's two 'bad boys.'

Focus on the work.

Right. And the easiest way to do that was to avoid them both as much as possible. Like now.

Instead of going back outside, she sat down on her mattress and opened her private journal. Rule number one. Keep a log of everything.

It would be invaluable when it came time to write her next book.

Which would not have a sexy picture of her in it.

Bhakti Sasmi and the two men who'd accompanied him to Flores exited their Land Rover as the camo-painted pickup truck pulled up to them. They were two miles down road from the scientists' camp so there'd be no chance of Vahle or her people wandering by.

"Well?" asked one of the two men who got out. Sasmi recognized his voice; the same person who'd contacted him in Jakarta and paid him a stupid amount of money to stop the scientists from coming to Flores.

"We did as you asked. Lots of damage, put one *bule* on the ground. He'll live," Sasmi added, seeing the man's scarred face twist into a scowl. The instructions had been no one gets killed. Not that death bothered Sasmi; he'd seen plenty and caused his fair share. But anyone who could throw money around like nothing in this part of the world was someone to be wary of. At least until he found out more.

"Are they going to leave?" The scarred man had a definite Spanish accent, but not Spain. The more Sasmi heard him speak, the more certain he was this man came from South America.

Sasmi shrugged. "Who can say? Maybe they are smart and go. Maybe they are not so smart. Why is this so important?"

"No es asunto tuyo." The man turned and whispered something to his partner, who handed him a phone. Sasmi pretended he

didn't understand the man's brief conversation, while silently laughing at their ignorance. He spoke Spanish almost as well as English, thanks to marrying a woman from Manila.

None of my business, eh? We'll see about that.

Scar-face returned. "You and your men will remain for another dia. If they don't leave, I may need you to… escalate things."

Yes, I heard your jefe tell you. I also heard what else he said. Sasmi stayed silent and nodded. He waited until the truck drove off, and then turned to his men.

"Find a place to hide the vehicle. We sleep here tonight."

Because tomorrow might be even more rewarding.

Murder carried a much higher price tag.

Sasmi took out his own phone. In the meantime, there was some information he wanted.

—Already the violence has started.—

The words echoed in the First's head like sounds in a cave. It was as he feared. The Tall Ones always brought violence. And his dreams had shown him the newcomers would not leave. Even now, they spoke to each other of digging holes and stealing bones.

Why bones? What purpose did they serve the Tall Ones?

Nothing seemed sacred to them, not the bones of those who went before or the protection of life. They cut down trees just to walk, left their scraps behind, and polluted the air with their metal beasts.

And they stole bones whenever they found them. Animals, the People, it didn't seem to matter.

—They are very strange. I do not like them.—

The First turned to his companion, Hides in Forest. The youngest of his three sons. Not strong like his brothers, but instead small and fast. Sometimes those things were important. Like now.

—It is good not to like them. Remember, they can never be trusted. But it is important to understand them.—

—That is why we watch?—

—Watch. Learn. Prepare.—

—Prepare for what?—

The First sighed. Had he ever been so young? It seemed like just a short time ago that he had accompanied his father and their First on a similar trek. There were Tall Ones then, too. Males and females who came from a far place, who discovered the place of the Elders.

Now he was older than the First had been on that night, but he remembered what they had done as if it was just one sleep ago.

Those Tall Ones had never left the jungle.

He hoped he would not have to give the same order.

But he feared there might be no other choice. So they watched. Learned. Prepared.

To fight.

Next to him, Hides in Forest nodded.

CH 11

Despite getting very little sleep, Annika was up at dawn. Her body ached, and not just from the previous day's exertions. When she'd returned to her tent after her watch shift, she'd found Devon Mackenzie waiting for her in her sleeping bag.

Neither of them had said a word.

Now, waking up to find him gone, she regretted giving in to the temptation. He'd been a decent lover, although it was hard to determine his actual prowess since they'd both taken extra care to keep quiet. They'd finished and he'd slipped out the back of the tent in less than ten minutes. Her one small orgasm had done little to take the edge off the pent up frustrations she'd been dealing with, thanks to the presence of both Devon and Blake. Plus she was pissed at herself for breaking her own rule about no camp dalliances. And it was only the first week!

Chiding herself for being stupid and wondering how she'd tell Devon it was a one-time thing, she dressed and went outside, where she found Blake already at the camp stove boiling water for coffee and tea. His presence didn't surprise her; he'd taken the last shift of the watch on purpose.

His first words after "G'day" did catch her off-guard.

"Be careful today, luv," he said, keeping his voice low. At first she was terrified he knew what had happened between her

and Devon. Then she caught the serious tone of his voice. Neither angry nor flirtatious.

"Whoever mucked up the camp isn't afraid to get violent. I think I should go into town with you."

"No." She'd thought about it and come to a decision. She needed to show everyone she wasn't some timid mouse. It was different for women in the field; they had to prove themselves in more ways than just scientific prowess. If she brought Blake along, everyone—the police, Sasmi, her team—would just think she couldn't handle things on her own, she needed a man to protect her.

She explained this to him, and got her second surprise of the morning. He agreed without an argument. Then he passed over a tiny pistol. She knew he carried a gun; he always did in the field. Most days the long revolver was strapped to his hip. But she'd never seen this one.

"It's a spare," he said, showing her how it worked. It only held two bullets, and all you did was pull the trigger. It slipped into her pocket without making a bulge. "Just in case."

Having it made her feel both more afraid and safer, a confusing mix of emotions that stayed with her when she climbed into headed toward town, grateful to be gone before Devon woke up.

She and Blake had made a plan that the rest of the team

would split up, half getting the camp back in order and the rest returning to the cave.

Never again would she leave one person alone in the camp.

Fifteen minutes of bumpy driving brought her to a sharp turn in the road. As she came around the bend, she found an olive-colored Land Rover blocking the road. She slammed on the brakes and the truck slid on the wet dirt before coming to a stop.

On the door of the Rover was the golden eagle symbol of the Indonesian Army.

A smug-looking Bhakti Sasmi stood next to the vehicle, with two other soldiers, both of them holding rifles.

Her heart pounding, Annika got out and approached Sasmi, aware that the miniature revolver in her pocket would be totally useless against their weapons if it came to that.

“Selamat pagi, Miss Vahle.” Sasmi didn’t bother with the usual polite nod that typically accompanied a greeting in Indonesia.

“Good morning to you, Bhakti,” she replied, purposely not using his title. Two could play that game. His eyes narrowed at the subtle insult.

“Are you and your people leaving so soon?” He looked past her, as if expecting more vehicles.

“On the contrary,” she said. “I’m not going anywhere,

except to the police station to file a complaint. It seems some… preman, I think is the word, made a bit of a mess in our camp. And we need some supplies."

Sasmi stepped forward, all pretense of civility gone. Anger flashed in his eyes and his voice dropped to a threatening growl.

"You should find yourself another island. Someplace safer, away from your so-called criminals."

"We only have permission to work here," she countered.

"Bones are bones. They are everywhere. Take your people and go." He waved a hand in the direction of town.

"Or what?"

His lips tightened and he patted the pistol on his belt.

"People get hurt in the jungle, Doctor." He emphasized the last word in mocking fashion. "Sometimes, they disappear."

He turned and climbed into the back seat of the Jeep. His men got in and the Jeep took off, tires shooting up mud that splattered her.

Annika remained in place for several moments, not trusting herself to move yet. Her hands were trembling and her heart wanted to leap from her chest. She also felt a sudden need to pee.

"Bad man," said a voice behind her. Annika gasped and turned.

Rudie Sukano sat in the back seat, staring at her with a furious expression.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Annika shouted, forgetting she was speaking to a child.

"Hid in back. You need me. I know people in town. My cousin is a policeman."

Annika started to tell him she was taking him back to camp but then stopped. If he did know the local police, that could be a big help. Plus he could negotiate better than her at the markets.

"Fine. But next time, no sneaking around. You could've gotten hurt."

We both could've, she thought, as she started the truck. Sasmi's words came back to her.

Sometimes, they disappear.

For the rest of the drive, she kept expecting shots to ring out from the jungle. It frightened her to think that death could be just moments away.

It also pissed her off.

This was supposed to be a time of triumph for her. As a woman in a field dominated by men, she'd struggled to be accepted, to be respected, since the day she entered her first field biology class in college. And it had only gotten worse in grad school, both in the labs and in the field. So many men

thought they were stronger, smarter, better.

Now, with her first opportunity to prove herself worthy of standing shoulder to shoulder not just with her peers but with the people she'd trained under, she was getting pushed around and threatened by locals who had some kind of secret agenda.

Everything inside her screamed 'don't let them do it!' Her reputation was at stake. Every decision she made would be examined under a microscope; like it or not, she would be a figurehead that other women paleoanthropologists would be judged by.

On the other hand, she had to consider the safety of her team. Her reputation wouldn't mean shit if they all ended up dead and buried somewhere.

What would Donald Johanson do? Or Bruce Latimer? They'd experienced all sorts of threats and dangers in Africa, from crooked cops to war chiefs to poachers.

They never gave up.

No, but they'd been smart. Made friends with locals. Maintained security. Gregory Forth, who'd spent more than a year living among the local tribes' and searching for the mysterious Flores man, never had any problems with the military.

Of course not. He was a man.

Bullies only pick on the weak.

A quote from her father. And not even said to her. She'd

been young, maybe seven or so, and her older brother Lucas had come home with a bloody nose from a playground fight. The other boy was the biggest kid in Lucas's class and liked to push everyone around.

Her father's words had been delivered along with a piece of advice that had stuck with her through the years.

The best way to stop a bully is to fight back. If you stand up to him, he'll back down.

The next day, the bully came after Lucas again, thinking he was an easy target. Except Lucas had stood his ground. He took some punches but gave some, too, and the bully ended up with a black eye. He never bothered Lucas again.

Fight back.

Easier said than done, Dad, not when the other guys have guns.

But there was always more than one way to fight.

And that gave her an idea of how to stop Sasmi in his tracks.

She glanced at Rudie.

"Is there a newspaper in your town?"

"Is it me, or does it seem like the it's taking a lot longer to reach that damn volcano this time?" Steven Webster

wiped an arm across his moon-shaped face. Only eight in the morning and the temperature and humidity were already unbearable.

"At least we don't have to climb it today." Next to him, Bernadette Clarke was already panting. Webster didn't comment, well aware he was only a few more minutes of hiking from being out of breath himself. It didn't escape his notice that he and Dr. Clarke were two birds of a feather, both older than anyone else on the team, both rather uncomfortable around other people.

Coincidentally—or was it?—Blake Downey had assigned them both to explore along the base of the mount, taking the same alternate route as the day before. They hadn't yet located the other caves Rudie Sukano had told them about. Instead, they'd gotten distracted from their goal by several interesting rock formations, their hike delayed by taking soil and rock samples.

Webster wondered if there might be more to it than their specialties, though. Had Downey purposely assigned them the easier trail based on their physical capabilities? Or lack thereof?

With rivers of sweat dripping down his neck and back, Webster decided it didn't matter. Climbing a mountain or hacking through a jungle. Two sides of the same shitty coin, as far as he was concerned.

"Wonderful." He waved a cloud of mosquitoes away. He'd

applied liberal amounts of bug spray earlier, but the bloodsuckers didn't seem to care.

According to their maps and Rudie's description, the game trail they were on would eventually lead them to an open area filled with stones and debris from a landslide that happened a few years back. At that point, they should start looking for the caves.

The trees crowded out the daylight, creating a surreal tunnel of greenery. A cacophony of bird calls and insect sounds preceded them as they walked, the local wildlife screeching and crying their warnings of strangers in their midst. Webster had no trouble imagining they'd stepped back in time. The sense of walking through a primordial environment made it seem half-possible that 'round the next turn would be a real *Papagomys armandvillei*, the giant rat of Flores, or even an actual *Stegodon florensis insularis*, the famous miniature elephant that had called the island home until about twelve thousand years ago.

In his mind's eye, he tried to picture how the island had looked back then. Thanks to its isolation and small size, Flores had been home to a whole bevy of biological oddities. Dwarf elephants and giant rats. Super-sized Komodo dragons. A stork with a twelve-foot wingspan.

And hunting all of it were the so-called hobbits of Flores,

Homo floresiensis. Flores man. The smallest known member of the *Homo* lineage. And like most of the island's other oddities, a dead-end offshoot of the main family tree.

Then, somewhere around eleven or twelve thousand years ago, almost all the native species had died out, with only the giant rat and the Komodo dragon remaining. All the other species on the island—deer, ordinary rats, monkeys—had been introduced by *Homo sapiens* when they migrated to the island.

Scientists continued to argue about the reason for the extinctions. Hunting, invasions by outside species (two-legged and four) from nearby islands, or perhaps a climate change, subtle but enough to shift the ecological balance that exists in all environments.

Even though he'd spent half his life studying extinct Indonesian and Australian animals, Webster still couldn't decide which theory checked enough boxes for him to consider it a fact.

He was about suggest they take a water break when something caught his attention.

The jungle had gone silent.

He paused, holding up his hand for Bernadette to stop. She raised an eyebrow and he put a finger to his lips. Her eyes widened and he knew she thinking the same thing as him.

The people who'd attacked their camp had returned.

He looked back just in time to see a shape disappear into

the brush at the side of the trail. Not a person; an impression of something low to the ground and brown lingered. A monkey, perhaps. There were a few species on Flores, and they ranged in size from tiny to a couple of feet tall.

Something rustled ahead of them. When he looked, nothing was there. More rustling, now on both sides of the path. Bernadette drew her short machete and belatedly Webster remembered to lift his own.

Silence.

After a couple of minutes where the only thing Webster could hear was his own blood pounding in his ears, a bird squawked overhead. Another joined it, and then the forest resumed its normal concert.

Webster took a deep breath and shrugged.

"I guess it's normal for us to be jumpy for awhile. But it doesn't seem like anyone's out here but us."

"I don't know if that makes me feel better," Bernadette said as they resumed walking. "Because the only other thing dangerous around here is the Komodo. And I sure as hell don't want to meet up with one."

Getting bit by a deadly lizard wasn't high on Webster's list, either, and he wished she hadn't mentioned it. For the next fifteen minutes he kept checking the sides of the path, where every movement made him think something was about to

charge after them.

Then the forest opened up and he forgot all about lizards and vandals.

Just above the base of the mountain was a cave.

The First watched the two Tall Ones enter the hole in the angry mountain. He knew they would find bones there. He'd seen them many times when sheltering inside during rains. Old bones, from flyers and runners that lived in the before times, when the People first came to this place to avoid the Tall Ones from across the waters.

Always running. Running from the Tall Ones. In the long, long ago times the Tall Ones had driven them from other places to this one. And then from their caves near the water, where food and shelter were good. Eventually there'd been nowhere else to go but deep into the trees. Even then they'd been found and forced to find new homes, until finally they forced to live inside the belly of the angry mountain that shook the land and sometimes roared.

—Will this keep us safe?—

The First looked at his daughter, Grows Like Flower, who had accompanied him this morning. Safe? They were never safe. That was the history of their people. He didn't have to tell her, she saw the truth of it. All the people did. There were no

secrets between them.

—Let us hope so, daughter.— He patted her shoulder. She'd been so happy to join him. Women were normally occupied with gathering and preparing food or taking care of the young ones. But right now there were few young ones. And someday there would be a new First, and if his son was not chosen, then the new First would need a wife. And who better than the daughter of their most recent leader?

For that reason, she needed to see the Tall Ones with her own eyes and learn from her father, so that she might counsel her future husband with the wisdom of experience.

If we survive to that day.

And even though it was a sin, that was a thought he made sure to hide.

Chapter 12

Sergeant Yohanes Jauhari descended through the maze-like branches of the banyan tree he'd climbed and jumped the last few feet to the ground.

"They have not left."

Bhakti Sasmi spat on the ground at the unwelcome news. The stubbornness of the scientists was putting him in a bad position. The damned woman, Vahle, who led them had surprised him with her resourcefulness. He'd expected her to go to the police, who would shrug and say they'd do what they could.

Instead, she'd gone to the local newspaper and told a reporter about the attack on their camp and the threats he'd made to her. Even gave him pictures of the damage. The story had been all over the internet by the afternoon and then the police had no choice but to get involved. There were already politicians in Jakarta demanding answers. Word had been passed that the scientists were to be extended all courtesies and protection they required.

Or there would be consequences.

His commanding officer had been furious, and he'd had to make an excuse that he had not threatened her, he'd been warning her about the dangers of the volcano and that some people had disappeared in the area, possibly from contact with the native

tribes.

Any other time, he'd have simply taken his men and returned home. What did he care about some foolish bone collectors?

This time, though, things were different. His contact in Jakarta had turned up a great deal of information about the so-called coffee plantation that had been purchased not far from Wai Sano.

And the man who owned it.

Hector Alphonse wasn't some coffee farmer; his real name was Herve Espinosa and he was a fugitive cartel head from Colombia who was now growing his cocaine on Flores. Worse, the man with the scar was Ernesto Reyes, Espinosa's right-hand man and a ruthless killer.

The kind of people that would not be happy if Sasmi told them he no longer wanted to work for them.

Thanks to the scientists, he now faced two very unpleasant choices: death from a drug lord or death from the firing squad for being a traitor to his country.

Why couldn't the scientists just leave?

Jauhari and two other soldiers, Kadik Satria and Anto Hadi, stared at him, waiting for his next orders. He kept his face impassive; if they knew any of this, they'd disappear as soon as he wasn't looking and turn him in to save their own skins.

"Perhaps they need more persuasi. Wait here until dark and

they are all asleep. Frighten them, however you want. But do not kill any of them. Report to me when it is done."

Sasmi climbed into his truck and drove off.

"What now?" Satria asked.

Jauhari shrugged. It was still hours before dark. Who knew how long the scientists would be awake even after the sun set? He wished they could've gone back to town with Sasmi and just returned later, in the middle of the night. Then at least they could have some food and a beer, not protein bars and warm water.

Before he could answer, a foul odor wafted through the makeshift camp, redolent of rotten meat and death.

"Bau apa iku?" Hadi waved his hand back and forth in front of his face. Satria laughed and told him the stink was his own body, he should bathe more often. Then the odor reached Jauhari as well and he grimaced.

"It's coming from over there," Satria said, holding his arm over his nose and pointing past the truck with his other hand. Jauhari motioned for the two soldiers to go see.

Hadi used his rifle to push some branches aside.

"Jancuk!" Hadi swore and jumped back. "Naga!"

Jauhari drew his gun. A Komodo dragon was indeed bad news. He peered through the leaves. They had been told there weren't any of the deadly reptiles anywhere near—

A few yards away, a good-sized monitor lizard, five feet at least, was chewing on the rotten carcass of a dead deer. It was far too large to be a common water monitor. Hundreds of flies buzzed around the corpse. Focused on its meal, the lizard hadn't noticed the men.

Yet.

"Shoot it," Jauhari whispered. The two soldiers glanced at him. The Komodo was protected; it was illegal to kill one. More than that, it was considered bad luck.

Both soldiers hesitated and Jauhari growled his disgust.

"Never mind. I will do it." He raised his gun and aimed it at the lizard.

Pain exploded in his head.

He cried out and toppled over. The gun went off. His vision blurred and the jungle disappeared into blackness.

Hadi and Satria stood frozen in place as the monitor hissed and then dragged its kill deeper into the jungle. The corporal lay on the ground, unmoving, his eyes closed. There was no sign of injury, yet something had taken him down.

"Silencio," Satria whispered, and Hadi understood what he meant. Not a command to be silent. A gun, the kind snipers used.

They'd been ambushed!

Satria turned slowly, his weapon at the ready. Hadi did the same. It had to be the plantation owner's men. The scientists

would never do something like that. He must be double-crossing them. Satria knew there was more to the man than coffee beans. He'd heard some of the whispered conversations between him and Sasmi. Enough to know there were some very bad people paying a lot of money for the scientists to leave.

The kind of people who would not hesitate to eliminate witnesses if things didn't go their way.

"We must leave," he told Hadi. The other man nodded. But a rustling in the brush stopped them.

Dark shapes darted through the trees. Too tall for a Komodo and too large for a monkey, but smaller than a man.

Children? Had Espinosa hired local boys to do his dirty work?

"Enough with the games!" Satria shouted. "Show yourselves or die."

A shape rose up in front of him.

No, it's not possible. Only a fairy tale…

Something struck the back of his head.

Then there was only darkness.

Annika jumped and dropped her cup of coffee as a single gunshot interrupted the after-dinner conversation in the camp. The rest of the team reacted similarly, jerking upright in their

camp chairs. Several people gasped and Shari grabbed Roy's arm.

"Bloody hell." Blake sprinted for the tent where the two rifles were kept.

"Is it the soldiers again?" Matt looked all around. Annika found herself doing the same thing. The dense vegetation made it impossible to tell where the shot came from or how far away it had been. They could be surrounded right now and not even know it.

"Hunters," Rudie said. He seemed unconcerned.

"Hunters? But this is a national park. There's no hunting allowed."

"Doesn't mean people don't do it, right?" Devon stubbed his ever-present cigarette out on the bottom of his boot and tossed the butt into a trash bag. He'd been in a sullen mood since Annika returned, which she'd attributed to her ignoring his attempts to pull her aside and talk. "Poachers are fair common on these islands."

"What the hell are they shooting?" Anton asked. As he spoke, Blake returned with the two rifles. He handed one to Jeff Nelson and kept the other himself, staring into the darkness as if he knew which direction the shot came from.

For all I know, he does, Annika thought. He did have a lot more experience camping than she did.

"Big lizards," Rudie said with a shrug. "Deer. My people

hunt long before anyone else comes to the island. Then we get told to stop. That is our food. We don't stop. We just be careful."

"Great." Roy's voice carried a mix of anxiety and wry humor. "Two days and we've already got soldiers who want us dead and poachers who might accidentally shoot us. It was safer in Chicago."

That made everyone laugh and eased the tension a bit. Blake and Jeff returned to their seats, although neither of them put away their guns. Annika was glad. Something about seeing Blake with a rifle next to him made her feel safe.

Good job, Annika. Way to be a damsel in distress with the big, strong man there to save you.

Trying to ignore her self-reproach, she cleared her throat and resumed telling everyone about her trip into town that morning. The meeting with the police had gotten them half-hearted promises of more patrols throughout their area of the park. But their luck had changed when she'd found a local man who worked for the Jakarta Post as a part-time reporter and photographer. He was happy to write up the story about their camp being attacked and Sasmi's threats. It had already gone out on the newswires and gotten a reaction from the Indonesian government.

After that, Rudie had taken her to the market, where they'd

been able to purchase two bags of fruit and more rice for cheap. That had been met with more cheers at camp than the assurances of safety.

As it turned out, she and Rudie had the least interesting day out of anyone. Bernadette and Steven had found a second cave, and inside it were hundreds of bones, some partially exposed, others just laying right on the ground. Steven had already identified avian, mammalian, and even reptilian remains, none of them modern. He'd informed Annika that he wanted to spend the rest of his time there, collecting and cataloging.

"It's a treasure trove," he kept saying. Bernadette was just as happy. The exposed stratigraphy of the mountain provided an excellent opportunity to collect samples and determine specific time periods, which would help them determine the age of any bones they found in the upper caves.

For Annika, that meant the trip was already a success. But then Blake had dropped another bomb on her.

"Well, it's no cave fulla prehistoric beasts, but we did find something today as well." He had held out his hand to her.

In his palm was a second stone blade, nearly identical to the one they'd found the previous day. So similar, in fact, she almost accused him of playing a joke on her. Then she took it from him and realized it was a little larger.

"Where?" she'd asked. He told her he'd gone a little deeper

into the cavern, where several additional tunnels and caves branched off. He hadn't entered any, but in front of one had been the blade.

"Do you still think they're planted?" She hated to even consider they were the butt of a massive prank, but in the paleontology world, it was more common than people wanted to believe.

He'd shrugged.

"At least this one was in a gully. We'll know once we start digging. Which we're all set to do in the morning."

She and Blake quickly worked out a schedule for the following day, with Steven and Bernadette returning to their cave, along with Anton as an extra pair of hands. The rest of the team would go up Wai Sano to the first cave. When Blake asked what about guards for the camp, she'd gotten a bit of revenge on him for waiting so long to tell her about his surprise by giving him one of her own.

"Two of Rudie's cousins will here first thing in the morning. They've agreed to be our guards for the whole time we're out here. They're big, strong, and have their own guns."

Blake had laughed and shaken his head.

"Good on ya, Ann. You might just have a knack for this field work."

She'd given him a friendly punch on the arm, which felt

like hitting a tree. His ability to remain in perfect shape had always annoyed her; now that they were older, it bugged her even more. She dieted, worked out at the gym four days a week, and still struggled to maintain her weight. While guys like Blake ate anything they wanted and never stepped foot in a gym, preferring extreme sports to weights and pushups.

"Gotta engage the mind, the spirit, and the body," he liked to say, whenever he tried to explain his preference for surfing, cross-country hiking, and mountain biking. "Life's too short to piss it away inside a gym or an office."

Watching him slouched in his camp chair, eyes half-closed, a beer in his hand, his Hawaiian shirt almost as loud as his personality, it was hard to imagine him as anything but a lazy frat boy. But if you looked closer, you saw that his free hand was never far from his rifle, and his eyes kept darting toward the brush even as he laughed at a joke or sipped his beer.

There was something wild inside him, almost primitive. Like someone had taken a *Homo sapiens* from fifty thousand years ago, shaved him, educated him, and taught him how to act in society. A real-life Tarzan, capable of blending in but more comfortable out in the wilderness.

Jesus, Annika. You sound like you're writing the back cover to a romance novel.

She glanced across at Devon Mackenzie.

He caught her glance and his expression lightened. He winked and raised his eyebrows, his offer obvious.

No. Keep this expedition purely business. You don't need that kind of reputation.

She shook her head and his attitude immediately darkened again. Rather than dwell on the inevitable conversation she'd need to have with him, she clinked her spoon against the side of her metal coffee cup.

"Hey, everyone. Rudie told me a story today on the way back from town, and I think it's one you all should hear." She nodded in the boy's direction. He looked rather taken aback, even though she'd asked him earlier if he'd repeat what he told her.

"What's this about?" Roy asked.

Blake shrugged. "Got me by the short hairs."

Rudie slowly walked over to Annika and sat down on the top of the table. He reminded her of a student being called to the front of the class, and she supposed that for him this was very much the same thing. There was a long pause, and she patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't be afraid. This is why they came here, just like me. To learn."

Blake frowned and she knew what he was probably thinking. Did the boy know something about the bones that he hadn't told anyone yet? She smiled to let him, and the others, know this was

nothing bad.

"Okay." Rudie looked right at her and Blake. He cleared his throat like a miniature MC drawing out the tension. The moment he spoke his next words, the camp went quiet.

"This is the story of the Ebu Gogo."

Less than ten yards away, the First motioned for the other hunters to lay down their weapons.

Something about these Tall Ones was different. Violence did not surround them in red waves like the others. And one of them, a child, had spoken a name he recognized. A name the long-ago Tall Ones had used for his people before he was born.

He wanted to know more.

Tonight, they would listen.

There would always be another time to attack.

Chapter 12

"My town is not old, but there are people living there from before."

"From before?" Matt asked.

"He means before the town was built," Annika explained, and indicated Rudie should continue.

"My people have lived on Flores for longer than there has been a United States. Their children's children's children are still here. Some have moved into the cities, others still live in the forests. Their tribes grow rice and grains, make cloth to sell in town. My own people are Ngade and Lio. Some still out there." He waved a hand at the dark jungle. "Other tribes, too. Manggarai. Ronga. Nagadha."

"How many tribes are there?" This time it was Shari who interrupted. Roy whispered something in her ear at the same time Devon answered for the group.

"Some say seven. Others as many as eleven. All with different dialects and customs and all that whatnot."

"Let the boy speak," Blake said, exasperation creeping into his voice. "Ask your questions later."

"A long time ago, our people came here from the other islands. To hunt, to trade, even to live. When they got here, they found the Ebu Gogo. The little people of the forest. In my

family, we call them Lao Ho'a. The little people of the forest."

"Your people?" Bernadette asked. Steven hushed her with a tap on the leg. Annika wondered if something was starting to kindle between them.

"*Homo erectus* was the first species to colonize the Indonesian islands," he whispered, "followed by *Homo sapiens* about a hundred thousand years ago."

She nodded and didn't ask anything else.

"The stories say that the Ebu Gogo did not talk like people. They spoke but did not speak. Sounds but not words. At first, they hid from the ones who came."

Rudie paused to sip from his soda. He no longer seemed nervous.

"What happened next?" ask Anton. Several others nodded, and Annika was happy to see they were all enraptured by the story, just as she had been when the boy told her.

"In those times, the Ebu Gogo lived in caves by the ocean. But as more people came here, they left those places and went deeper into the forests. They wanted nothing to do with the people. For long, long times, the Java people and the Ebu Gogo existed here. They left each other alone. The Java people were afraid of the Ebu Gogo because the little people had magic powers. They could turn people to stone. They could disappear in the blink of an eye. And the Ebu Gogo feared the Java people

because of their better spears and knives, and because there were more of them."

"And fire," Blake interjected, forgetting his own rule about interrupting. "*Erectus* and *sapiens* both had fire."

"Our people tried to teach the Ebu Gogo to speak, but they only ever learned a few words. They did not wear clothes, either. Very hairy, like monkeys.

"Then one day white people arrive from across the ocean. They wanted the land of the Ebu Gogo because it was very beautiful and full of game and fruit. They built churches and towns. When they discovered the Ebu Gogo, they chased them from their caves and killed them with their guns. But not all of them. The little people were fast, and they had their magic. The ones that escaped went to other parts of the island. Deeper. Places like Wai Sano, where the white people did not want to go. The Ebu Gogo very good at hiding. Even from the tribes. Now there may not be any left. Long time, no one sees them. Not since my ebu, my father's father."

Rudie gave his tiny audience a smile and returned to his chair. Roy clapped, and the others joined in.

"Thank you, Rudie," Annika said. "What's fascinating is that it parallels what we know about *Homo floresiensis*."

"Spot on." Blake gestured with his beer. "The fossil record shows that Flores man was already here when the first Homo

erectus groups migrated down to these islands from Asia. And although those same records indicate that the entire race disappeared around fifty thousand years ago, the legends of the tiny people persisted long after the Dutch and Portuguese settled here."

"Stories handed down from one generation to the next, like leprechauns, elves, or faeries? Or could a few isolated families have existed into the sixteenth century or so, when Rudie's men with guns arrived? That would only be about five hundred years ago," Roy chimed in.

Bernadette raised her hand. "What else do we know about them? I mean, I've read the file you gave us. But is there anything that's suspected but not proven?"

"Good question, luv." Blake put his beer down, which Annika knew meant he was already prepared to answer. "We know our hobbits, as the media folk like to call them, are definitely an offshoot of *Homo* that came here long before *Homo erectus* and evolved in a new way because of their isolation. Their bone structure, teeth, and skull shape are all different from the other hominins of the same time period in the surrounding geographies. Part modern man, partly as primitive as any Australopithecine you'll come across. And very, very small."

"Which is the norm for Flores," Steven Webster said. "This island was home to several miniature versions of animals that

grew to normal size on the mainland. At the same time, other species went in the other direction. There were several very large rats, like the giant rat of today, and a huge carnivorous stork. And, of course, the varanid lizards, like the Komodo dragon and its cousins."

"Environmental pressures," Annika added. "Tiny island, a lot of competition for food and shelter. Nature favored diminishing size. It's happened on other islands before, like Crete."

A chorus of sharp barks exploded from the trees around them and spread deeper into the jungle. Hundreds of birds erupted from the trees, their cries of alarm adding to the din. Blake grabbed his rifle and jumped up.

"What is—"

Shari's question was cut off as the ground trembled and then shook. Drinks toppled over and one of the camp stoves fell. Roy held Shari close and Steven clutched Bernadette's arm.

As quickly as they hit, the vibrations stopped. Moments later, the jungle returned to its previous calm.

The tremor had only lasted a few seconds, but that was enough to sour Annika's mood. After they straightened up the camp and checked the equipment for any damage, she told everyone they should get a good night's sleep, because in the morning, they would start digging.

That night, her dreams were filled with unseen shapes and voices whispering strange words she couldn't understand.

"This can't be right."

Arnold Worthington stared at the printout and then at Amar Gupta, who'd personally brought it to him.

"We've triple-checked it. There's always a tiny margin of error when dealing with samples in this age range, but I'm confident in the results. I can't explain them, but if there's contamination, it's not on our end."

Worthington looked at the paper again. Radiocarbon data was notoriously fickle and hotly contested whenever a new archeological find came to light and disrupted previously accepted timelines.

This one was going to do more than disrupt the timeline.

It was going to blow it up.

Less than five hundred years. Even assuming a very wide margin of error, hell, a huge one, that would still place the *H. floresiensis* jaw well within modern history.

Or just yesterday, if the error goes in the other direction. Worthington told himself not to even think about that. The scientific community would string him up if he even hinted he believed that.

Except there was even more evidence it might be true. Evidence sitting on his desk in two separate folders, both of which he'd gotten only hours before Gupta's report.

Evidence he'd so far kept completely to himself.

DNA testing had provided a complete genomic map, something never accomplished before with Flores man. The previous best attempt, on bones dating back approximately fifty thousand years, produced only a ten percent mapping. Enough to verify its status in the Homo line, but little else.

This—Worthington couldn't help glancing at the blue file folder on his desk—enabled comparison not only to modern humans but to multiple other branches in the hominin family tree.

"Is this some kind of joke?" read the note from Dr. Alan Leiter, who ran the university's DNA lab. *"This bone isn't petrified or even preserved. And the DNA isn't right."*

Leiter's note went on to say at he initially believed it to be a mix of human and chimpanzee DNA, and then the computer analysis showed it more resembled a combination of human and Australopithecine.

And then there was the final punch in the gut. The teeth. Another lab had used lasers to create a 3D map of the jaw and each tooth. Dr. Zuri Igwe, a specialist in hominin teeth from the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa who was serving as a visiting professor at Case, had compared them to

the known Flores man fossils in Annika Vahle's absence (and with her permission).

They were a strong match. But not identical.

Which, in this instance, raised even more questions.

Subtle differences in the shape of the jaw, the alignment of the teeth, and the shape and wear of the teeth themselves. Differences not visible to the human eye.

Dr. Igwe's opinion was that these were not population variances, although he conceded that was possible.

"More than anything, they appear to be evolutionary. Quite similar to the trends we see in other hominins when we look at fossils found in the same region but from different periods of time, usually several thousand years."

Worthington looked at Gupta and saw in the scientist's eyes the same thought that wouldn't leave his own head.

The fossils were recent.

Very recent.

He opened his laptop and prepared to compose a new email. He couldn't postpone sending the data to Annika any longer. She needed to see it right away.

She might just be on the verge of the greatest discovery in modern history.

Whenever she was in the field, Annika stuck to the same routine: first thing in the morning she made a cup of coffee and drank it in her tent while reviewing emails and text messages on her laptop. Her workload at Case demanded she keep up to date with the various projects she and her team had going, and it also helped keep her head clear for the job at hand. Otherwise she'd spend all day obsessing over a cluttered mailbox.

The morning after her encounter with Sasmi, she'd only taken two sips of the strong but surprisingly flavorful Javanese brew they'd picked up in town when she saw a message from Arnold Worthington.

Lab Results. Your Eyes Only.

She came awake right away.

It wasn't like Worthington to be so secretive. In fact, it wasn't like him to send her lab results at all; usually each lab would just forward them as they got completed.

A few sentences into the message, she understood why.

If the general public were to find out…

Blake needs to know.

Not because she felt any obligation to tell him. It was her project; he was just along for political reasons. No, he needed to know because it would require a new strategy and if he didn't know the reason behind it, he'd ask too many questions. Blake was a lot of things, but not stupid.

Also, and she hated to admit it, this news was so big she needed someone to talk to about it. Someone who she trusted. And as much as Blake drove her crazy, she knew she could trust him with anything.

Except your heart.

That almost stopped her, but common sense overruled emotion. She went outside to where he was making tea and whispered, "In my tent. Now."

"S'koin-?"

She shushed him and he followed her without another word. As soon as he lowered the flap behind him, she motioned for him to stay quiet and handed him the laptop. He started reading, his gem-stone blue eyes darting back and forth. After a few seconds, his eyebrows shot up and he gave a low whistle. She knew he'd reached the part about the carbon dating.

When he paused and looked at her over the laptop, she nodded, knowing he'd gotten to the section on tooth morphology.

When he finished, he set the computer down and shook his head.

"Strewth! If this is true…"

"Yeah."

Neither of them spoke for a moment after that. Finally, Blake scratched his chin.

"What do you wanna do?"

"First off, we don't tell anyone else. Every person who knows is another opportunity for the beans to get spilled. If the data's wrong, we'd be the laughingstocks of the world. No one on this team would ever get another job outside of a community college. Plus the media would go nuts. Everyone from National Geographic to The National Enquirer will be swarming the jungle."

"You got that right, luv."

She quickly outlined her plan. They'd continue as if nothing had changed, but they'd extend their exploration of the cave deeper right away. Blake agreed with the strategy, and even came up with a logical reason. During their initial excavations the previous day, he'd seen lots of evidence that the outer area of the cave had experienced flooding on more than one occasion, most likely from the frequent typhoons that hit the region.

"We'll give 'em a bit of a fibber. Say we want to see if conditions are better deeper in, with less mixing of strata, eh?"

"That's perfect."

He and Annika decided they'd take turns checking out the other caves, in between watching over the grad students and assisting with the digging.

Still trying to come to grips with the possibility of a recently extinct—or not!—*Homo floresiensis* population, Annika

nodded and exited the tent.

Where she found several members of the team, including Roy, sitting around the camp stove and doing their best to pretend they didn't see Blake emerging right behind her.

Devon Mackenzie, on the other hand, scowled and went back into his tent.

Dammit! Now she was on even worse terms with her photographer and her entire team would think she'd hooked up with her ex. The last thing she wanted. Hoping to salvage some dignity—and her reputation—she turned to Blake and in a loud voice said, "So, we're in agreement then. The other caves do bear investigation."

"I reckon. Now, if that's all, I need to fix myself some brekkie before we get to work." He tipped his hat to her and walked away. She could see by everyone's expressions no one believed it had simply been a meeting. Then Danny cleared his throat and approached her.

"Annika, we've got a problem," he said, his voice low.

"What?" It was all she could do to concentrate. She wanted to get to the cave as fast as possible.

"Some of my tools are missing."

"Missing?" Annika frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." He explained that several wrenches and a hammer were gone. He'd looked everywhere, thinking they got put into

the wrong boxes after the vandalism of their camp, but he couldn't find them.

"You think Sasmi's men took them?"

"I can't imagine who else."

"Alright. We'll have to make due until our next trip to town. Do me a favor and check all our supplies, make sure they didn't take anything else. Hopefully, once we have full-time guards, we won't have to worry about that kind of thing again."

Which reminded her, the men they'd hired as camp guards should be arriving soon.

"Okay, guys," she called out. "Let's finish up with breakfast and be ready go in fifteen. Today's gonna be a long one."

"I believe you are mistaken."

The rough, heavily accented voice from behind her made her turn.

Five men stood there, rifles on their shoulders and angry scowls on their faces.

One of them stepped forward. A scar ran across his cheek and down his neck, disappearing into the collar of his black dress shirt. When he smiled, it radiated pure evil.

"The only thing you will be doing today is leaving."

Chapter 13

When Annika was a young girl, her mother used to always tell her to think before speaking. That her mouth would get her in trouble one day. And she'd been right. All through school, Annika's habit of not knowing when to keep her mouth shut caused more than her fair share of problems. Fights in the schoolyard when people teased her or her friends. Trips to the principal's office when she corrected teachers on science facts.

And later in life, lonely nights when she was too honest with boyfriends about her feelings, or lack of them. She'd eventually learned to control her impulsive tendencies in order to play the political games in graduate school and then as a professor.

All of that self-control flew out the window when the scar-faced man uttered his threat.

"I don't think so," she said, and someone in the camp gasped. "We have permission from the government to be here."

The stranger's smile grew wider and uglier.

"We do not care about your permissions. You will be gone by mañana. Find another island to dig on. Many jungles, many caves, many islands. But you cannot stay here." His hand dropped to his waist, where a large pistol rested on his hip. The threat was obvious, but all it did was stoke the fires of rage inside

Annika. She squared her shoulders and straightened her back, putting every inch of her five-foot-eight in front of him.

"You can take your goons and get the hell out of my camp," she said, feeling the heat of blood rushing to her face. "Your military friends already tried threatening us and it didn't work. We won't be intimidated."

"Er, Annika, calm down, okay?" Blake placed a hand on her shoulder but she shook him off.

"No! I won't be chased away by anyone. This is a scientific expedition. We'll just call—"

Faster than Annika could follow, the scarred man drew his pistol, turned, and fired a single shot into the radio, which sat on a table away from the eating area. The report made everyone jump and several people cried out. Sparks flew and the radio slid sideways on the table.

"The next one will be in your corazón." The man tapped his heart and pointed the gun at Annika. It was only then that she realized this was no threat. These men would actually kill them right there.

"Put guns down."

Relieve rushed through Annika as three native teenagers emerged from the trees, rifles pointed at the strangers. The scarred man's smile vanished, replaced by a furious scowl. His eyes narrowed but he dropped his gun and motioned for his men to

put down their rifles.

"Go away now," one of the natives said. He barely looked old enough to shave but the rifle was steady in his hands and his voice was calm, as if he did this every day. "Not come back. Or maybe you end up in ora belly," he added, using the local word for Komodo dragon.

The scar-faced man looked at Annika. "Last warning. Leave today or things won't end well for any of you." He bent to pick up his gun and one of the teenagers fired a shot that kicked up dirt right near the man's feet.

His face turned red as he backed away and motioned to his men. All of them wore angry scowls as they followed him down the path. Two of Rudie's friends trailed behind, guns at the ready.

A few moments later Annika heard the sound of a car starting and not long after that the two boys returned. By then, Blake and Jeff had gathered the weapons off the ground and stacked them on a table. Blake tucked the pistol in his belt.

Rudie introduced his three friends as Liem, Raul, and Hari. Liem explained that they'd been driving to camp and seen a truck parked on the side of the road. They'd recognized it immediately. Bad men, he said, stating that they were coffee farmers who sometimes came into town. But everyone was afraid of them.

"The man who threatened you, his name is Reyes. Very

dangerous. Always with a gun. He works for a man named Hector Alphonse. But that is not his real name. People in town say they hear Reyes on the phone. He calls Alphonse jefe, means boss. But sometimes, he say a different name. Señior Espinosa."

"People say they not growing coffee, it is kokain." One of the boys, Raul, pointed east. "That way. Three, four kilometers."

"Cocaine? We're camping right next to the bloody cartel?" Jeff Nelson threw his hands up in the air. "Well, isn't that just bloody great."

Annika wanted to scream. It seemed like the gods were determined to ruin her expedition before it even got started.

"Well, that explains one thing, don't it?" Blake raised an eyebrow at her.

"What?"

He took a step back, surprised at the venom in her voice, but answered her anyhow.

"Sasmi. Him and his goons are probably in this cartel bloke's pocket."

Annika groaned. It made sense. But it didn't help with the problem. What should she do? If she gave in and left, she'd be ruined professionally. She couldn't go to the government, there was no telling who else was involved. And if they stayed, she'd be putting everyone at risk.

They couldn't even go to another part of the island, or a different island. The permission granted from the government only covered Wai Sano and the nearby…

Wait. That was it. Wai Sano was the key.

She called for everyone's attention.

"All right, listen up. Change of plans. Take down the camp."

A chorus of cries met her announcement and she held her hands up for everyone to quiet down.

"We're not leaving. Although anyone who wants to go, you have my blessing. I understand. This trip just got more dangerous, and I won't ask anyone to stay who doesn't want to. The rest of us, we're packing up and moving to Wai Sano. Hopefully that'll satisfy the cartel. Rudie, if we do this, will we be closer or farther away from that plantation?"

The boy had a quick conversation in his native tongue with his friends. One of them made gestures with his hands, and Rudie nodded. Then he turned back to Annika.

"About same distance. But harder to get to. No good roads from them to mountain. Not like here." He pointed to the path that led from camp to Wai San, and to town in the other direction. "Bad men not go to mountain. No need."

"We know the perfect spot," Webster said. "Right at the base, where Bernie and I found the other cave."

"Okay. So, who wants to go back to Jakarta? Remember, no shame."

No one raised their hand, although Shari bit her lip. Roy whispered something in her ear and she shook her head.

"Well, that's that," Blake said, his usual broad grin back in place. "I, for one, think the whole idea's a beaut. Cuts our morning trek in half, don't it. That means an extra hour or two of digging each day."

He gave Annika's arm a squeeze and walked off, shouting orders for breaking down the camp.

Annika managed a smile in return, but inside her emotions still warred with each other. Was she making the right choice? If anyone got hurt because of her decision she'd never forgive herself. But they couldn't leave! Even if she had to complete the dig alone, she wasn't giving up. And damn those drug dealers for putting her in this position.

"Well, Doctor Vahle, I guess you've really hit the big time."

She jumped, so lost in her thoughts she hadn't noticed Devon Mackenzie's approach.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "C'mon, you know the stories better than anyone, I'd wager. All the big names. Leakey. Johansen. Tim White. Tattersol. Roy Chapman Andrews. All of them wrote about

the dangers they faced in the field. Warlords. Criminals. Poachers. And now look at you. Standing up to rogue soldiers and a drug lord. That's going to give your next book a huge boost. And my name'll be right there."

Annika's anger returned. Was he planning on blackmailing her? Just because she wouldn't sleep with him again?

"What do you mean?"

Mackenzie held up his phone. On the screen was a photo of the scar-faced man with his gun in his hand.

"You took pictures?" Annika couldn't believe it. She'd been too frightened to think straight and he'd had the good sense to photograph what was happening?

"And video. Documented the whole thing. Or most of it, anyhow. Enough to prove what happened and maybe even find out who our nasty friend was. With your permission, of course." He said this last with a fairly sarcastic tone.

"Yes!" This was amazing. If they could get the man's name, then maybe they could do something about him.

"All right, then." He turned, and she touched his shoulder to stop him. The air needed to be cleared, and now was the best time, with no one nearby.

"Devon. About… you know. I… we can't have a repeat. I'm sorry. This dig is too important. I can't afford to get a reputation, or—"

"Eh, no worries, luv. Glad you gave me a shot, eh? Who knows, maybe when this is all over, we'll have another go."

He tipped his hat and walked away, already composing a message to one of his innumerable contacts. Only then did his earlier comment sink in.

Her next book.

A chapter, or more, about getting threatened at gun point.

Now that would be great for publicity. People loved danger, and it sold books.

Remembering the icy block of dread in her gut when she saw the guns, her new enthusiasm dimmed.

A best-seller wouldn't matter if she was dead.

"Can we try that again, luv?"

"Oh, come on. How many times do we have to do this?"

Annika threw her gloves down, wishing she had something that would break. Mackenzie peered at her over the camera and shook his head. "Hey, no going off on me. It's my job, right? Make you look good on camera. You're the star of the show, Doc. You can't sound like you're buggered and bored, eh?"

"Except I am exhausted, and I've just repeated the same lines a dozen times. Of course I sound bored!"

Through a supreme group effort and some luck at having a

relatively dry morning, the team had broken down the camp and gotten to the base of Wai San in record time, with Rudie and one of his friends guiding the trucks down a series of animal trails never intended for vehicles. Blake had gone up to the cave with Roy and Shari to start digging while the rest of the group set up the tents and tables at the new site. Annika had to admit it was a good choice; larger and clearer than the previous camp. And they could be at their dig in an hour. She wished she'd done this three days ago. Maybe then they wouldn't have had any trouble to begin with.

And they'd still have a radio.

Danny Chen was doing his best to fix it, but he didn't have high hopes.

They'd finished with almost three hours of daylight left, so Annika had gone to the cave to check on things. When she arrived, Mackenzie was already there getting filler shots that hopefully later on would be 'before' footage for a world-shaking discovery.

Seeing her, he'd asked her to explain what the team was doing. She detailed how a grid was laid down and each square marked so that anything they found could be labeled accurately.

Only her impromptu lecture on excavation techniques in the field wasn't capturing what the videographer wanted.

"No ho-hum David Attenborough monologue, for the love of

Oscar," he said, waving a hand at her. "Be you. You're in the field, hoping to discover something new. Let people see the excitement."

"Maybe we all need to take a pisser." Blake was smiling as he said it, but his tone made it more of an order. Mackenzie shrugged, turned the camera off, and wandered over to the cooler to grab a soda.

"Bit of a mongrel, ain't he," Blake said, handing Annika a bottle of water. She gratefully accepted it and downed half in one gulp. The altitude and perpetual darkness of the cave kept the air cooler than down in the rainforest, but it was still over eighty. Between the physical work and all her talking for the camera, she was parched.

Normally she might laugh at the Aussie slang for someone who's a tool, but for some reason her hackles rose and she felt a need to defend Mackenzie to her ex.

"He's just doing his job." She sipped more water, as much to clear the dust from her throat as to stop her from saying something nasty. "This is as big an opportunity for him as it is for us. He might even win an award."

"Nothing to do with him fancying you, either." Blake waggled his eyebrows and winked, unfazed by her reaction.

"He doesn't fancy me." Annika lowered her voice, remembering how the cave amplified sound. She was glad the dim

light hid the blush she felt creeping up her cheeks. "What's the matter, jealous? You had your chance and you blew it, remember?"

Blake's smile fell away and she knew she'd finally gotten to him. She felt no satisfaction in it, though, and immediately regretted acting so petty. Yet her stupid pride prevented her from apologizing as he shook his head.

"Good on ya, Ann, that you can live in yer perfect world."

He walked away. She hated that he could make such a strong exit without raising his voice or marching off in a huff. Typical Blake, always keeping an even keel in any situation.

Damn him! Now her emotions were all churning, a boiling stew of frustration and guilt. Plus a big dash of lust, and it pissed her off even more that she couldn't decide who she wanted, or if she wanted anyone at all.

What I need is a cold shower.

"What you need is to be the bigger person. Call Blake and work out whatever problems you have. Otherwise it'll keep eating at you."

"Shut up, Cassie," she whispered. Her old friend had given her that piece of advice a couple of months after Blake went radio silent upon his return to Australia. She'd ignored it, believing that just putting him out of her life and mind would be better. After all, the odds of them actually seeing each other again had been slim to none.

Now Cassie's words came back to haunt her, because she was in the same damn situation again, with unresolved issues and bottled-up feelings that had only intensified over the years, without her even realizing it.

Mackenzie gave her a wave and called out.

"Ready for another take, Doc?"

Annika groaned.

Talking to the camera was the last thing she wanted to do.

"Hey, I found something!"

All other thoughts flew from Annika's head as she hurried to where Roy was on his knees and pointing at the ground. Mackenzie darted across the cave as well, his camera already aimed at where the grad student had been digging.

"Show me." Annika's pulse was racing with that familiar thrill that always accompanied a possible discovery in the field. Nothing could top that adrenaline rush, not getting a book published, not getting a job, not even sex.

Roy used a camel-hair brush to clean off a tiny white nub sticking up from the dirt. She recognized it instantly and almost groaned with disappointment as her hopes sank.

"It's a tooth, but not homo," she said.

"Looks like a stegadon," Blake added from over her shoulder. "Keep going. Webster'll be right happy to see it. He can compare it to the ones they're finding in the other cave."

Annika gave Roy's shoulder a pat. "It's a good start," she said, putting some enthusiasm she didn't feel into her voice. It was only day three, they had plenty of time. They would find something.

They had to.

Chapter 14

Herve Espinosa stalked back and forth behind the desk in his office. That was how he liked to think of it. Stalking. Like a big, silent jaguar prowling the jungle, creeping up on prey. You never sense the danger until it's too late.

On the other side of the desk, Captain Bhakti Sasmi sat in one of the two chairs. Ernesto Reyes stood behind the other, hands behind his back, a disfigured statue. It was not lost on Espinosa that both men were killers, and both scarred. But one of them was far more dangerous.

And his scar much more prominent.

"There is nothing more I can do," Sasmi said, for the fourth or fifth time. Espinosa had stopped counting. The man was useless. He commanded an army yet had no authority to remove the scientists. How could that be? Did this *stupido* island government really care more for bones and universities than money and power?

With the scientists aware now of Reyes' men and ready for them with their own guards, Reyes had proposed combining their security team with Sasmi's group and simply forcing the scientists' hands through sheer numbers. That way, Reyes wouldn't need to pull any of the workers from the fields or his men guarding the crops to run the annoying woman and her people

off the island.

Only Sasmi kept insisting he'd been ordered to stand down.

"I have lost three men already. My superiors are demanding to know why I am even here on this island. I have much explaining to do. I am no use to you now."

"If you say so, then I must believe you," Espinosa said, coming to a stop. He nodded to Reyes.

In one swift motion, Reyes drew his knife and swung his arm down, plunging the six-inch blade precisely into Sasmi's heart. The army captain let out a cry that quickly devolved into a series of choking grunts. His body twitched and then went still. Reyes held him and guided the dead man to the floor.

Other than a widening stain on his uniform shirt, there wasn't even a mess to clean.

"Dispose of him." Espinosa waved his hand. Such a waste. Now they would need to find another partner in the military. In the meantime, the *lizardos* would feast well. That was one thing Flores had in common with Colombia. There were always animals ready to dispose of the bodies. Back home, it was the *cocodrilos* in the rivers and the wild pigs in the jungle. Here, the dragon lizards.

A knock on the door made both men turn.

"Quién es?" Reyes asked, his hand moving toward the gun on his hip. No one interrupted when the office door was closed, not

unless it was an emergency.

"Luis," a voice called out, and Espinosa nodded. Luis Devia was one of Reyes' most trusted guards and often served as the head of security if Reyes had to leave for an extended period.

"Entras," Reyes said. The tall, thin guard came in.

"The scientists are gone," he announced, but he didn't seem pleased about it.

"And?" Espinosa made sure to use a tone of voice that demanded the full truth.

"We don't know where they are. No one has reported them in town. We think they may have gone to the volcano."

"Find them."

"Is it time to end this?" Reyes asked.

"No." Espinosa held up his hand. If the Indonesian army didn't have the authority to remove a handful of scientists, it was possible they had more connections with the government than even Sasmi had been aware of. Espinosa was not so *estupido* to think Sasmi's disappearance would go unnoticed. A visit from the government might occur. To have the scientists vanishing at the same time? That could cause a full-scale investigation. In this instance, perhaps patience would be more appropriate. They could always kill the scientists later.

"Just watch them for now. Do nothing unless you see them approach the fields. For their sake, let us hope they stay on

their mountain and dig in their caves."

Espinosa went to sit down but the ground heaved under his feet and his chair rolled away, sending him tumbling to the floor. Outside, birds and animals howled and screeched. Several bottles fell off the wet bar and Devia grabbed the door to keep from falling. The rumbling of the tremor grew louder, a symphony of kettle drums pounding harder and harder. Glass shattered somewhere in the house and voices cried out for help. Plaster dust rained down like snow and Espinosa rolled under his desk.

The reverberations continued to the point where Espinosa felt a terrifying certainty that this was no earthquake, the volcano had decided to erupt and soon they'd all be boiled away in a lake of molten lava.

Then it stopped.

In the sudden quiet, he heard people shouting and car alarms wailing.

Reyes came around and peered down at him.

"Are you all right, jefe?"

"Si." Espinosa emerged and brushed himself off. He glanced up. Long cracks zig-zagged across the ceiling. "Have that repaired immediatamente. And make sure the walls and floors are sound." The last thing he needed was the house to come crashing down around him.

"At once." Reyes pulled out his phone and barked orders in

rapid Spanish. Espinosa went to the window and considered Wai Sano in the distance. No smoke, no lava.

But for how long?

"Everyone out of the cave!" Blake's voice barely carried above the roar of the mountain shaking around them. He pushed Shari and Roy toward the entrance, then pulled Annika up from the ground and held her steady as they ran for daylight. Dust and pebbles peppered them and outside dozens of larger rocks tumbled down the slope like a miniature landslide.

"Grab hold of something," he shouted. He led Annika to a nearby scrub tree and she clutched the branches with both hands. Then he half-walked, half-crawled over to where Roy was helping Shari back to her feet and steered them toward a clump of bushes. When they were secure, he checked to make sure Mackenzie had found a safe handhold. Only then did he return to Annika, somehow keeping his balance despite the ground shifting under his feet.

He'd just taken a grip on the tree when the vibrations stopped.

"Is everyone okay?" Annika called out, once she caught her breath.

A chorus of "Yes" and "All good" answered her. Blake

straightened his hat. “Biggun, it was. I reckon we should check on the camp. I don’t fancy being here if there’s an aftershock.”

Annika touched his arm and he stopped.

“Thank you,” she said, and meant it. He’d handled the sudden emergency like it was a walk on the beach. Quite possibly he’d saved some or all of them from injury.

“Camp’s okay.” Roy held up his two-way radio. “Danny says everything’s fine. Some stuff fell over but nothing broke.”

“Good.” That was a relief for Annika. They didn’t need more damage to their equipment. And no one got hurt, which was even more important. They’d head down, regroup, have an early night and tomorrow——

“Hey, Annika!” Mackenzie had climbed back up to the cave, probably to get his equipment. She hadn’t even noticed. “You might want to see this.”

Anxiety and frustration turned into a lump in her chest. Something happened to the excavation area. That would be just their luck. She was already picturing some of the cave ceiling falling onto their dig site. They’d have to start over, which would put them two days behind at least.

Blake reached the entrance first and let out a long whistle.

When she got there, she saw why.

A jagged crack ran across the cave floor and disappeared

into the darkness at the back. It was at least eighteen inches deep and at least as wide.

And inside were the unmistakable gray shapes of bones.

—It is bad?—

—Yes.—

The First didn't try to hide the truth from his people. That wasn't allowed. Even if it was, no barriers in his head would be strong enough. Not when his fear and regret were so great. What would it matter anyhow? The people were not stupid. They understood what this meant.

The Earth Mother had chosen to reveal her secrets. Secrets even the First hadn't known.

Why, he could not say. The Elders might have answers, but the presence of the Tall Ones made entering the caves dangerous. Since their arrival, he had not spoken with them. Being without their counsel left an empty place inside him, a hole that grew larger each day.

Watches Children touched his arm.

—Perhaps that is why the Earth Mother is angry.—

The First stopped to consider his second mate's words. It was something he had not thought of. Was this Earth Mother's way of telling him the Elders wanted to speak with him? Or was it

like Killer of Lizards, their best hunter, had stated earlier? That it was a sign the gods wanted them to act instead of watch?

The First hated having to make these decisions. For his whole life, and the lives of his sire and grandsire, the only worry had been keeping themselves hidden from the Tall Ones.

When he had become the First, he had learned of the Peoples' future. How they would meet their end. The Elders told him of it, just as they had told the other Firsts before him. They had seen it, so long ago the passing seasons could not be counted. The path of the People ended in a blazing wall of red fire. Beyond that was only darkness.

It was no secret that time was drawing closer. Since before his birth, there were fewer babies to replace those who finished their lives. The Tall Ones were different. They multiplied like rats. More of them filled the island each season, arriving on their floating caves and being shat out from the bellies of the flying beasts.

They traveled the jungles with no idea of what they were doing, what dangers lay around them. They cut down the trees and killed the animals, and then didn't even eat them. Their shiny beasts roared through the lands, spitting terrible smells and smoke. And they carried weapons that killed from a distance.

Despite this, the First had believed the end would not happen in his lifetime. In all his conversations with the

Elders, not once had they told him he would lead the People into their final days. Surely they would not have kept such a thing secret from him.

Would they?

One was not supposed to doubt the Elders; they knew both the past and future. Yet now the First couldn't help wonder.

Did they also keep secrets?

It was often hard to understand them because they spoke in riddles and delivered information shrouded in clouds. They forced the Firsts to think rather than just dispensing advice. The reason for that was simple. The conversations were lessons, helping each First grow, become a better leader. As with children, it was never good to just hand them things.

If you give the people all the food, they will never learn to hunt. Old words from long before his birth.

Do the Elders keep secrets?

The First felt the eyes of his people on him, those near and far. They were waiting for his decision. Watch or fight.

They do not know the burden of this decision. Because I keep it a secret.

In that moment, everything became clear. He was keeping secrets. It was something only the Firsts could do. And what were the Elders but the oldest of the Firsts?

If the actions of the Earth Mother was a sign, then perhaps

the message was a simple one.

—I will speak with the Elders.—

The people hummed and whispered their agreement. In all things, the Elders knew best. Killer of Lizards and Black Bird stood.

—We will accompany you.—

The First nodded.

—It will be dark soon. We will wait until the Goddess Moon rises above the trees and then go.—

The people left the circle to go about their business, leaving the First alone with his sorrow.

For no matter how many paths of possibility he followed, all of them led him to the same inevitable place.

The wall of fire.

Chapter 15

Never in her life had Annika felt so… jubilant. It was the only word she could think of to describe the mix of emotions whirling through her. Joy, excitement, vindication, anticipation.

They'd done it!

Sure, there'd been some help from an earthquake, but they'd actually uncovered the first new *Homo floresiensis* bones in years. And if their cursory evaluation was accurate, these would prove Flores man had lived further into modern times than anyone previously believed.

Her mental checklist popped up again, as it had every few minutes since they dug out the first of the bones the previous day.

No obvious mineral deposition.

The same approximate weight as a modern bone of similar size.

Practically identical to the bones she'd studied.

No signs of fossilization!

And there were more of them. In fact, almost a complete skeleton, from what she and Blake had been able to determine so far. They'd have to excavate the trench further today, after running out of daylight the previous evening. But so far they'd

identified a partial cranium, a full mandible with five teeth, some ribs, several bones from the upper and lower arms and legs, and smaller pieces that she hoped would end up being hand or foot phalanges rather than just animal remains.

Most importantly, they'd uncovered six vertebrae, a real rarity, which, along with the limb bones and teeth, would help them narrow down the individual's size, age at time of death, and weight.

The fact that they were all in one small location, together with the absence of duplicate bones, had everyone's hopes up that this was a single individual.

Sipping her coffee as the camp came alive around her, Annika no longer cared about earthquakes, threats from the military, or homicidal drug warlords.

All that mattered was uncovering everything Wai Sano had hidden in its dark depths.

She'd come to Flores with a reputation as a solid but unremarkable paleoanthropologist and now thanks to fate—twice!—and her willingness to take chances, she'd be going home as one of the biggest names in her field.

If these bones turned out to be as young as she suspected, combined with the lab data she'd gotten from Worthington, she was about to rewrite anthropological history.

"Beaut of a day to cause a stir, what?"

Blake held out his cup and she clinked hers against it with a laugh. Field work humor at its best. For most people, the day was anything but perfect. Hot, so muggy the air practically dripped moisture, and a gray sky that forbode rain later. Probably a lot of it. Returning down the mountain would not be fun.

And she didn't care at all. It was a beautiful day because of the promise it held. The promise of discovery.

"What's the plan?"

They'd already discussed it the night before with everyone, so she knew this was just him making conversation. He was as eager as her to see what else lay in the cave, and she'd bet that like her, he'd been up half the night thinking about the implications of their find and how their lives would change when word got out.

Famous didn't even describe it. They'd be superstars.

"We stick to what we decided last night." The strategy was simple. The bones in the trench had been in a jumble; at some point in time water had flowed over a corpse and moved it, most likely from deeper in the cave. In the process, the skeleton had come apart. Eventually, it came to rest. At that point, either more flooding had covered it in silt or there'd been some kind of minor cave-in that dumped soil and rock on it. It would be the job of Roy, Shari, and Anton Schnell to widen the area

they'd begun excavating yesterday, map the location and depth of each bone, label the bones, and bring them back to camp. At the same time, Matt Grundig would be collecting earth and rock samples from above, below, and next to each bone so that later on Bernadette Clarke could determine their age and match them with any stratification layers she described.

Steven Webster would continue his work in the other caves, where the animal and avian remains had been found.

Annika would be overseeing all of this, but she also intended to accompany Blake on his exploration of the inner caverns and tunnels. If his suspicions turned out right, and there really were more skeletal remains back there that hadn't washed out, she didn't want to miss being there to find them.

Danny and Jeff would remain at camp with Rudie's guards. Their job would be to enter all the finds into the database and then pack them for shipment. Danny was also still working on getting their radio fixed, but privately Annika had given up hope salvaging it. That was her only real worry; they'd discovered that Wai Sano blocked any cell signals, so without the radio, they had no way of communicating with the outside world unless they drove a half-hour toward town.

If anything happened, like a medical emergency or another attack from the drug lord's men, they were effectively on their own.

Well, so be it. Nothing is going to ruin this for me.

Thirty minutes later, the group headed up the slope and an hour after that everyone was fully engrossed in their work. With the digging in full swing, Annika turned to Blake.

"Shall we explore?"

He tipped his hat to her.

"After you, oh amazing expedition leader."

Even Blake's teasing couldn't dampen her good mood. Neither could Devon Mackenzie's constant presence. He'd set up stationary cameras around the new dig site so he could capture anything that happened there and still follow Annika around, almost as if he expected her to make another astounding discovery.

Let's hope he's right.

The cameras she could deal with. It was his new attitude that was driving her crazy. After their talk, he'd made it a point to be overly smarmy, smirking and ogling her at every chance, well aware that she got embarrassed thinking about their one-time tryst and enjoying how it got her flustered.

She was also sure he was doing it because he knew it annoyed Blake.

Forcing herself to ignore the rising testosterone levels around her, she headed for the back of the cave. As they walked, she flicked her light around, making sure to convey her

observations aloud for Mackenzie's camera. Not just the geographic details, but her thoughts about the reasoning a prehistoric tribe might have for living so deep within the cave system.

"Protection from enemies, and wildlife. Shelter from not only wind and rain, but high and low temperatures."

"Caves tend to remain relatively stable, temperature-wise," Blake explained for the future audience. "No extremes."

"And, of course, religious ceremonies," Annika continued.

"Like burials," Devon said.

"Yes, like burials," struggling to keep her voice neutral. *Fingers crossed these people did that, and we find it.*

The cave went back a good fifty yards before the sides began to narrow. Not enough to worry about, just enough to remind her they were in a lava tube. Blake periodically marked the walls with bright pink chalk, just in case the tunnel branched. Each branch would get marked in a different color so they couldn't get confused.

After a good five minutes of walking, they reached a split; the larger tube continuing forward with a slight upward slope, and the new one, which was much narrower, on the right.

"What do you think?" Blake asked.

Annika chewed her lip. The main tunnel, being larger, would seem to be the most logical choice. Easier, and because of the

slope, it was most likely where the occasional flooding originated, with the water flowing downhill to the entrance. Primitive cultures would be drawn to it because of size and accessibility. An entire group could move through it with ease.

But the side tunnel… something about it drew her. Smaller shafts were often used by neolithic populations because they were easier to defend.

Which meant they had something that needed defending. Like a home site.

Or a sacred burial ground.

A faint rumble broke her concentration. It continued on for several seconds, never growing louder. She looked back, fearful another earthquake was about to strike. Mackenzie grinned at her over the top of his camera.

“Not a shaker. Thunder. Sounds like the rain’s about to arrive.”

That made her decision for her. The previous bones had been washed down by water. Which meant following the path of the flooding was their best bet to find others.

“Let’s go straight. The wider tunnel.”

Just far enough back from the entrance to the side tunnel to avoid the cold fires the Tall Ones carried, The First laid down the cold, heavy weapon he’d taken from their things. Danger

had been averted, at least for now. The Elders remained safe and undiscovered. He had been deep in conversation with them when they told him the Tall Ones were coming. They also said a time of change approached, but it wasn't to be today.

<Send them the other way.>

— They will still find the bones they seek,— he countered.

<Yes. This cannot be stopped. It is too late. But they do not know our ways. One bone is the same as the next to them. They collect them as children collect pretty stones. Perhaps they will take a few and leave. The gods have revealed some of the dead for a reason. As long as they do not disturb this place.>

The rest went unsaid. The Elders had already told him the People must defend the sacred place at all costs. As the First, he must do whatever necessary to keep the true secrets of the People from the world.

He wished he could simply tell the Tall Ones to go away. It would be so easy. But that would mean revealing himself, and the People, to the outsiders. Long ago, many Firsts before his time, the People had tried that. In turn, the Tall Ones hunted the People with weapons more powerful than blades or spears.

After that, the Elders commanded that the People hide forever so that in time the Tall Ones would forget about them.

Now their existence was threatened again.

The First watched the Tall Ones continue on. He had tried his best to hide the remains of the dead People in the ground after the waters moved them from the Place of the Forever Sleep. Perhaps it would be enough, that the Tall Ones would be satisfied by digging up the bones of long-ago People. That they would take their stolen parts and their stinking moving caves and return to the place they came from.

The First picked up his stolen weapon.

Otherwise, he would make sure they never left the island, and their bones joined those of the animals.

After a time, the tunnel began to narrow. Claustrophobia still wasn't a concern but Annika was beginning to fear she might have to call a halt if the walls and ceiling got too close, or if the tunnel continued on too far without leading them to another cavern. Given the volatility of the mountain, the last thing she wanted was to be stuck in a collapsed tunnel.

Then, just when it reached the point where it was only wide enough for three people to walk shoulder-to-shoulder and the height was barely ten feet, Blake, who was a couple of steps in the lead, let out a laugh and grabbed her arm.

"Have a gander at this!"

Their flashlights revealed another cave, this one nearly as large as the one they'd started in. Several lava tubes branched

off, their openings impenetrably black, secret passageways begging for exploration.

Annika cast her light around, taking it all in, while Mackenzie stepped off to one side and filmed the discovery for posterity, his camera lights illuminating the cavern all the way to the back.

Something on the floor caught Annika's eyes. Trained from years of work in Africa, it immediately stood out as wrong somehow.

"Don't move," she said, holding out her arms so neither of the men would step past her.

"What is it, luv?" Blake asked.

"Over there." She pointed at a place near the center of the cave. "On the floor. The earth isn't as smooth. Almost as if…"

"Something got buried," Blake finished. He trained his light on the ground in front of them, slowly moving it toward the spot Annika had indicated. No marks. But when he moved it past there…

"Is that…?" he didn't finish his question. Because it couldn't be.

"A footprint," Annika whispered.

"What, couldn't it be one of the locals?" Mackenzie's words brought Annika back to reality. Of course it could. Rudie and his friends knew all about these caves. They could've explored

them for days, for years, before finding those bones.

Still, there was the email from Worthington. The lab results only she and Blake knew about.

They had to be careful. Very careful.

"Let's see. Don't anyone walk in that area."

She led them on a roundabout way toward the center. Logic said it was most likely that an animal had buried something in the ground, and kids had walked through the cave.

Yet her heart continued to speed up, her body reacting to possibility, to dreams, rather than logic.

She glanced at Blake and saw the same excitement in his eyes. It was a familiar sensation to any field scientist, those moments before you learn the truth, when anything is possible. When an ordinary monkey bone or animal tooth could still be something else entirely, something fantastic, an entirely new discovery…

Reaching the area of rougher, looser earth, she pointed her light at it. "Something or someone definitely buried something here."

"Look." Blake's light focused on the footprint. Smaller than an adult's, larger than a small child. Annika mentally compared it to her own size eight, and estimated it to be a couple of sizes smaller. A five, or a six.

A person on the shorter side, around five-foot or so…

Or an ancient primate with unusually large feet. Flores Man stood only three and a half feet tall, but it had large feet for its size. About the same as a five-foot human's.

Her excitement factor rose to another level. The print itself was faint due to only a thin layer of dust and earth on top of the hard, compacted soil. Blake shined his light around, but it was the only print. It looked human enough, but there wasn't enough detail to make an accurate identification.

"What's so interesting about a footprint?" Mackenzie asked, leaning over her shoulder with the camera. The bright light washed out the area and she wished he'd back up.

"All part of the scientific method, mate," Blake said. "Never muck up anything, right? "

He took a tiny can of white spray paint from his pack and made a mark on either side of the print. Took several photographs with his phone, including two with a ruler next it. Then, after giving Annika a glance and getting a nod in return, he knelt next to the rough patch of ground and poked his finger into it.

His eyes went wide as his finger sank in all the way to the third knuckle.

Annika scraped at the ground with her hand. The earth came away easily. Right away, her fingers touched something hard and she understood Blake's surprise.

Two more scoops revealed the curved ridge of an ilium, the upper part of a hip bone.

Its shape was neither animal nor monkey.

"Holy shit," she said.

Blake looked at Mackenzie.

"You best get all of this. We just found another body."

Chapter 16

Annika plopped down into her camp chair, exhausted but at the same time more energized than she'd ever been in the field.

No, in her *life*.

Never in all her years had there been a day like this.

The discovery of the bones in the back cave had gone from amazing to something she couldn't even put into words. Blake had returned to the main cave to let the others know, while Annika used the little digging kit she'd brought with her to unearth more of the hip. By the time Blake returned with Roy, Shari, and Anton, she'd already exposed not only one whole side of the pelvis but several vertebrae and the upper part of a femur. Mackenzie had filmed the entire ground-breaking event.

The loose soil made disinterring the remains easy as scooping potting soil from a bag. She quickly arranged her students in a make-shift assembly line: she and Blake did the digging, Mackenzie took photos as each bone was uncovered, and then the bones were passed to the students for labeling and placement in temporary packaging.

During the process, Roy, who was doing his doctoral research on hominin femurs and their articulation within the acetabular socket of the pelvis, confirmed her and Blake's identification of *H. floresiensis*.

Not that they'd needed it.

It quickly became apparent they had most, if not all, of a full skeleton and that the bones were not ancient. To Annika's trained eye, they didn't look much different than skeletons she'd seen interred from modern graves. Discolored and fading, but without any evidence of mineralization that would come from centuries of burial in the soil.

And then they'd hit the real jackpot.

Organic material.

Bits of what appeared to be skin. Tufts of hair. Additional, non-primate bones with a section of scaled hide. Alongside these were two blades made of stone and a sharpened bone that might have also been used as a knife.

It only took them five hours to uncover the entire skeleton.

Now, back at camp, Blake was preparing a late supper while the students reassembled the bones on one of the camp tables. Each one had a plastic tag wrapped around it, with a number. Matt Grundig had already entered the numbers into the database and was now adding description specifics in the comments sections. Length, orientation, approximate weight. All of it would be used later to determine the size and age of the individual, who Annika had nicknamed Rudie in honor of him leading them to the caves. Further examination would be needed

to confirm that all the bones belonged to one individual, but so far it seemed very likely. There were no duplicates and all the odd ones that didn't match seemed to be from a small animal, which Webster identified as a reptile, most likely a medium-sized monitor lizard, species unknown.

From what they could tell, the skeleton was almost 75% complete. That alone was a rarity in the anthropological world.

It was also the most complete skeleton of a Flores man ever discovered. Even with just the camp lights to work by, Annika, Blake, and Roy both agreed there was no denying the identification. The teeth, the shape of the bones, the size of the feet, the body height. A male, fully adult.

There'd been a couple of anomalies as well.

Three of the leg bones—both fibulas and one tibia—showed scratches or gouges on them, marks that were inconsistent with just damage from being tumbled over rocks. Annika thought they might be bite marks, and mentioned to the others that she'd seen similar, although larger, patterns on the bones of animals eaten by large predators.

The other oddity was the color and condition of the bones, which Annika had noted while excavating them.

They demonstrated no signs of petrification. The color was that of something that had only been buried a few hundred years. There were water stains, but they didn't appear to go deep.

Even to the least experienced members of the team, the evidence was obvious.

The bones were recent.

"Don't jump to conclusions," Annika warned them, despite silently agreeing when both Roy and Jeff pointed out the various indicators. "Scientists have been fooled before and paid the price, reputation-wise. For all we know, there could be something in the soil that prevented fossilization."

"Or the whole thing could be someone pulling a fastie on us," Blake added. But the tone of his voice told Annika he was just as thrilled by the discovery as she was.

They had it.

Potentially incontrovertible proof that Flores Man had survived as a race right up until modern times. Maybe as recently as a hundred years ago.

She thought back to what Rudie had said. That their peoples' great-grandfathers still told tales of encountering the Ebu Gogo. Or the Lao Ho'a, to use the other local name for them.

Three generations. An ancient race of hominins that went extinct only three generations ago. If she could provide undeniable proof of that…

Blake gave her a wink and a nod, as usual totally in sync with her thoughts.

They would be the most famous anthropologists in the

history of the world.

Which meant everything, down to the very tiniest detail, had to be handled strictly by the book. And with Mackenzie filming it all, that meant no supposing, no revealing how she really felt. Keep herself and the team focused on nothing but the facts.

Let the scientific method and laboratory evidence lead the inevitably way to only one possible conclusion.

“Steven, I want you to see if you can match those gouges to any of the predators that have existed on the island. A giant rat or one of the monitor lizards. Something that might’ve scavenged the remains after death. And see if you can get a more specific ID on our lizard. Shari and Anton can help you with that. Also, look for anything that might tell us if the animal just happened to be interred next to our specimen by nature, or if he was eating it.”

“And someone needs to do scrapings,” Blake added. Annika cursed herself for forgetting.

“Yes. Roy, I want you to handle that. Anything organic. Cross-match them not only with the bones they came from but also the specific point of location in the burial area. We might discover soil chemistry differences. Jeff, after you finish prepping and wrapping the other skeleton for transport, you can start on this one.”

"This is all amazing," Bernie Clarke said. "But I think I'm best served continuing my stratigraphic mapping, both in the caves and down below. Because of erosion and past lava flows, there's a lot of deformation among the layers of rock. And the similarity of material and color between them makes identification difficult. I'm hoping that carbon date comparisons between the samples I've taken and your bones clarifies the time lines better."

Annika nodded her approval. Despite requiring a decent understanding of geology for her profession—after all, you couldn't always count on having a geologist with you when you unearthed a fossil—she was out of her league when it came to the intricacies of mapping geologic layers and formations. She'd always envied Blake's seemingly eidetic memory of the different geologic timelines at each place they'd hiked while dating.

"Tomorrow, while you're all taking care of that, Blake and I will return to the dig site. Danny, I want you with us," she said to the electronics specialist. "We'll need you to operate the ground-penetrating radar. With only limited time here, I don't want to waste any of it digging in the wrong places. We'll scan the areas around where both skeletons were found and see if we can locate any other bones."

She gave Blake a sideways glance and he acknowledged her unspoken meaning with the slightest tilt of his head. They would

both find ways to explore deeper into the cave system.

If things were washing out, they had to originate from somewhere.

The idea of an entire family, or perhaps even a tribe, of *Homo floresiensis* living somewhere deep in the caverns, protected from weather and predators—including the two-legged variety—and only emerging to forage for food and water, wouldn't leave her mind. If they found something like that, there was so much more they could learn. Did they use other tools? Make fire?

Create art?

That made her laugh at herself. They'd already unearthed the discovery of the century, and here she was praying for the discovery of the millennium.

How typical of me. She fought back a smile. *Only a few hours, and already two skeletons isn't enough. I want more.*

Her roommates in college had always told her she was never satisfied with being second-best. And she'd never denied it; that drive to be Number One was what had allowed her to succeed in a male-dominated profession.

It took all her self-control to remember they might not find any other evidence of Flores Man, at least not this time around. She had to keep reminding herself that while famous sites like Omo in Africa had yielded plenty of skeletons and other finds, it wasn't like digging up a cemetery. Sometimes

years went by with nothing but meager chips of bone for weeks of effort. And then a heavy rain might reveal an entire family of hominin skeletons. Or a campfire with tools.

Paleoanthropology was still a crapshoot, no matter how much modern science continued to improve the odds.

If you forgot that, even for a moment, you opened the door for terrible disappointment. She'd seen it before; plenty of people in her field never found so much as a single complete bone. And more than a few of them descended into depression, which they usually tried to fight with alcohol or bitter jealousy, or both.

Annika checked her watch. It was getting late. But she was too amped up to sleep. And judging from the excited faces around her, so was the rest of the team.

Ah, what the hell.

She got up and went over to one of the small shipping boxes she'd brought, one that hadn't been opened yet. From inside she removed several bottles of champagne.

"I was saving this for the end of the trip," she said, motioning for everyone to gather around. "But I can't think of a better time to celebrate. I want you all to remember this night, because in anthropology, you never know if you'll ever have one like it again. To us!"

She raised a bottle and popped the top off. The group

cheered, and she handed out the other bottles. Soon everyone was toasting with camp mugs of champagne or, in Blake's case, drinking straight from the bottle. It was warm as piss, but Annika didn't care.

She'd never want to drink it any other way after this. It would always be the taste of success.

Two glasses later, she was feeling nicely buzzed. Never a heavy drinker to begin with, it was the first alcohol she'd had since leaving the US. That, plus her exhaustion, had her head spinning a bit when Blake sat down beside her.

"Do ya reckon the last time we got pissed in the field?" he asked, bumping her shoulder with his.

"Oh, god, yes." She giggled, remembering the night well. Too late, she realized they'd both spoken loud enough for the others to hear.

"What happened? Was that a big discovery, too?" Shari asked.

"The biggest," Blake replied with a hearty chuckle. Annika felt her face grow warm and it wasn't from the alcohol. Shari and Roy spoke at the same time, saying they wanted to hear the story. Blake shook his head.

"Not mine to tell. That's up to Dr. Vahle," he said, purposely teasing her by getting formal.

Annika almost said she didn't want to talk about it, but

then thought, what the hell.

"We were in grad school," she began, and the whole camp moved closer to hear, even Rudie and his friends from town. "This should be a cautionary tale never to drink too much in the field. We were in Africa, at a site near Florisbad. We'd actually had a pretty good day. Two ribs and some teeth. Turned out later they were *Homo heidelbergensis*. Nothing ground-breaking, but for a couple of students on only their second foreign dig, it was exciting as hell. A few of us decided to celebrate with some bottles of the local wine, Jerepigo. Well, I didn't know that it's made with brandy added to it. We all got fairly drunk—"

"More like totally legless," Blake interjected.

"Hey, it's my story, remember?" Annika shook a finger at him and then continued. "Anyhow, we finished it all and called it a night. I went back to the girls' tent but first I made a stop at the loo, as our Aussie friends call it."

A few people laughed and she smiled back.

"Wait, it gets better. I still had a half-glass of wine with me. Which I decided to finish while I was, well, doing my business."

"Pissing while pissed," Blake chuckled. "Never a good mix."

More laughter.

"As I discovered. I spilled the whole glass right into my

pants. Red wine everywhere. Thing is, we were near the end of the expedition and I was pretty much out of clean anything. I needed those pants for the next day! So I headed down to the river and went right in. Walked around until I was sure all the stains had washed out. But then I had another problem. I had to dry them. So I went back to the tent, put on a pair of shorts, and hung the pants to dry on one of the tent lines. I figured I'd get up early in the morning and bring them in."

"Ah, luv, I think you're forgetting something." Blake raised his eyebrows.

The heat returned to Annika's face. He wasn't going to let her off the hook.

"Right. Well, it wasn't just my pants. It was my… underwear, too."

"Tell them." Blake was unsuccessful in holding back a grin.

"My last pair. Remember, we were grad students. Not a lot of money. I wasn't going to bring anything good for the trip, so I'd gone to a discount store and bought the cheapest pack I could find. Sadly, they were all pink. A set of seven with giant labels on them. Sunday through Saturday."

"Right smack on the derriere." Blake was fighting not to laugh.

"Oh, no," Shari said, covering her mouth with both hands. From the way she said it, Annika had the feeling the girl had

done something similar for their current trip.

"Oh, yes. But it gets worse. Turns out I was drunker than I thought, and I didn't wake as early as I wanted."

"She was the last one up."

"I walked out of the tent and the entire group was standing there waiting. With their cameras. Dr. Downey here was right in front, holding my 'Wednesday' undies up in the air for all to see. I froze. And then, all as one, they shouted at me." She looked at Blake, giving him permission to deliver the final line.

He didn't hesitate.

"Hey, Ann, it's Friday!" he yelled.

For a moment, there was only silence in the camp. Then Devon Mackenzie burst into laughter. Everyone else joined in. Annika even allowed herself a few chuckles.

When the hilarity died down, Annika clinked her mug to Blake's. The rest of the team took that as their cue to say goodnight and start heading off to their own tents. Even buzzed, Annika noticed that Shari followed Roy instead of going to the tent she shared with Bernie. Annika wondered if that meant Steven Webster would soon be joining the geologist.

"Ah, young love," Blake said, also watching the couple, who thought they were being sly.

He put a hand on her shoulder, and for a frightening moment

she thought he might ask if she wanted a similar rendezvous. In her present state, she wasn't sure she'd be able to say no.

Instead, he whispered into her ear. "Something's funny about those teeth."

His words flushed the alcohol buzz from her brain.

"What do you mean?"

He led her over to the table where the bones were laid out under several lamps. Using a pencil, he tapped the molars and then the incisors. "See anything odd?"

She squinted. They were obviously *H. floresiensis*. She'd studied every known fossil so well she could draw them in her sleep. Yes, these looked slightly different, but that could be simple wear and tear from different food sources to normal variances between individuals. Certainly nothing to indicate it might be a different race.

She said that, and then added "What am I supposed to be looking for?"

Blake shook his head and pointed at the bones. Legs, then arms. "What about those?"

Confused as to what he was leading up to, she examined each one. "They all seem consistent with an adult male. All the right proportions and shapes."

"Exactly," he said. "All the right proportions. For an ancient pygmy race."

The way he emphasized ancient made her pause and look at everything again.

The body was nearly identical to the skeletons of previous finds. But the teeth… something about them…

Patterns of wear, her mind supplied, and in that moment she understood what he was getting at.

The wear patterns on the teeth seemed to indicate that this specimen ate very different foods than the ones she'd studied from various museums. Eating habits created distinctive wear patterns on human teeth. Hard objects like nuts versus softer foods like fruit or fish. Gnawing on bones versus stripping grass and grains with the teeth. Even if a population tended to be omnivores, like most hominins, certain foods were more common and created identifiable patterns.

Over the course of time, those patterns might alter if the population moved to another area. Or if the food source changed.

Which made their specimen even more of an anomaly, in a way she hadn't realized.

It had the body of a five thousand-year-old Flores Man.

But the teeth of one from an entirely different era.

The question was, from when?

Ch 17

"This is mierda," Juan Zamora whispered. Water dripped from his hair and his clothes were soaked. Although the thunderstorm that passed through had been brief, it had been so strong even the trees provided no shelter. Now, in true Flores fashion, the heat had grown more oppressive despite it being almost eleven at night.

"Cállate." Paolo Bautista wiped condensation off the lenses of his night vision goggles. Zamora frowned at being told to shut up. Secretly Bautista agreed with his partner. This was a bullshit assignment. But that didn't mean you could get careless. Also, it was never a good idea to complain about any orders given. Ernesto Reyes had a way of knowing everything that people did and said. Sometimes Paolo was sure all their rooms and vehicles were bugged.

"What are they doing?" Zamora asked.

"Nada," Paolo replied. "They are all asleep." They'd been watching the camp since before dark. Earlier, there had been much excitement when the scientists returned from the mountain. They had spoken of bones and discoveries, and there was even a skeleton laid out on a table, under a heavy tarp, in one of the tents. Paolo didn't understand it, but it also didn't surprise him. Back in Colombia, scientists from all over the world came

to dig at the *pirámides* of the Incas and other ancient peoples. So many men and women with their fascination for the dead. And all too often it put their lives in danger, yet still they came.

For what? Paolo gave a mental shake of his head. There was no money in bones, except on the black market.

"Good. I am tired of this." Zamora stood up. "It is time for action."

"What are you doing?" Paolo asked.

"Reyes said we cannot harm the científicos," the other man said. "But he did not say we cannot make their lives more difficult. Look. They left their precious bones unprotected. Who is to say some animal might not take them? Or break them? If we cannot scare these people away, perhaps we can make it so they have no reason to stay."

Paolo thought about it. If they were able to make the scientists leave without hurting anyone, they wouldn't be disobeying orders. And they would be *héroes* in the eyes of Reyes and Espinosa. Perhaps even rewarded.

"Alright. But careful. We cannot be seen or Reyes will feed us to the lizardos."

The two men crept through the wet undergrowth. When they reached the clearing, they paused and listened for any signs that someone might be away and keeping watch. After counting to thirty, Paolo motioned for them to move forward. They headed

right for the tent with the bones and lifted the tarp.

These people are *loco*, Paolo thought, staring at the remains. Each bone had a label affixed to it. He picked one up. It felt no different than any other he'd ever held.

A bone is a bone, why come all this way to dig them up?

He pulled his arm back to throw it into the forest. A sharp paid erupted inside his head. He dropped the bone and put both hands to his temples. Zamora gasped and fell to his knees, holding his head as well.

Colored spots filled Paolo's vision. He saw movement, blurred and too fast to follow.

Something struck his face and that was all he knew.

Herve Espinosa had just finished the last of his morning coffee when Ernesto Reyes knocked and entered without waiting for permission.

"We have a problem," Reyes said. His face was dark with anger, which made the scar stand out more than usual.

"What is it?" Espinosa asked, standing up. To have his second in command so agitated, it had to be something very bad. Policía, perhaps. Or federales.

"We have two men dead."

"Explain."

Reyes shook his head. “I cannot. I think you should see for yourself.”

Espinosa followed the assassin out to the edge of the nearest cocaína field. After the previous night’s storm, the day was still gray and so humid it felt like trying to breathe through a wet towel.

Several men were gathered by the first row of plants. All of them looked pale and worried. The small group parted to let Reyes and Espinosa through. Espinosa let out a curse when he saw the bodies. They lay on their stomachs, arms above their heads like they were diving. Their exposed flesh bruised and cut, and the backs of their heads crushed as if struck by a heavy object. Spatters of blood stained their shirts.

“They were found here this morning,” Reyes said. “No one has touched them.”

Reyes’ words confirmed Espinosa’s initial thought.

This was no work accident.

Then he noticed something else.

“There is no blood on the ground. No sign of struggle.”

“Si,” Reyes replied. “They were not killed here. These are the men I had watching the camp of the scientists.”

“You think the Americanos did this?” It seemed impossible. The lady scientist was stubborn, to be sure. And from what he’d been told, two of the men with her were certainly large enough.

But to murder someone? That was not how *científicos* acted. They would call in the police, expose his secrets to the press. Not kill men in cold blood and leave them as a warning.

That was how the cartels operated.

"No," Reyes said, confirming Espinosa's thoughts. "But it is possible the villagers they hired could do such a thing."

Espinosa considered that. In their time on Flores, they'd had no trouble with any of the locals. In fact, several worked for them, maintaining the house. Of course, they were not allowed in the fields or the processing areas. In town, the ones they did business with were polite but reserved. It wasn't much different than how the cartels were treated back in Colombia.

And yet, there were always instances of unhappy villagers joining with the *rebeldes*. Guerilla forces would occasionally ambush cartel soldiers in isolated places. Or gun them down on street corners, what the Americanos called drive-bys.

"Malparido," Espinosa muttered. Reyes nodded. Whoever did this surely was the lowest of the low. He looked at his lieutenant, who calmly awaited his next orders.

Except they still couldn't kill the damned scientists. This wasn't Medellín. He didn't have immunity from the government or *policía*. He said as much to Reyes, who scowled.

"What, then?"

Bribery was out of the question. Scientists didn't care

about money, just bones and rocks.

"We cannot kill them. But we can frighten them. Frighten them so badly they do not want to stay. Make them fear for their lives."

Reyes' frown deepened. Espinosa understood why. They'd already threatened the scientists. It hadn't worked.

"I trust you to think of something," Espinosa said. "If they are afraid to sleep, afraid to walk in the woods… surely they will leave."

Reyes scratched his chin. "What if there were to be… accidentos? The jungle, it is a dangerous place. People get hurt all the time."

Espinosa laughed. "Yes! This is why I keep you close, my friend. Just make sure it cannot point suspicion our way."

The scarred man saluted and left, leaving Espinosa to stare at the bodies of the dead men.

Two deaths on Reyes' watch. It wasn't the other man's fault, but he would take it very personally, not just out of pride but anxiety as well. There was an old saying in Colombia. *Éxito o ataúd.* Success or the coffin.

Or, as his father used to say, the best motivation is fear.

Right now, Ernesto Reyes would be feeling *muy motivado*.

Annika leaned back and wiped her arm across her forehead. It came away streaked with dirt and sweat.

Her team had spent all morning digging at the location of the skeleton they'd dubbed Rudie. The partial remains in the other cave had been nicknamed Kersen, after Rudie's younger brother. Rudie had beamed when informed of their academic immortality.

Everyone had been up before the sun, eager to get back to work. Annika had split them into two groups, with Jeff and Anton staying at camp to prepare the bones for shipping, and the rest of them returning to the site of the discovery. They'd laid out a rough grid around the initial dig area and now everyone was busy with their trowels, brushes, and picks.

Only it had been five hours and not a damn thing had turned up. Not a tooth, a bone, or even a stone tool.

Nothing.

As the hours dragged on, Annika's enthusiasm had waned and now it had moved into frustration territory. She knew she shouldn't be upset. After all, dig sites were notoriously fickle. You could carve five feet into the ground in one place, and the next day discover a skeleton two feet away.

With that in mind, she'd had Danny Chen go over the whole cave with the ground-penetrating radar.

He'd come up empty.

She felt like throwing her trowel across the cave and shouting at the walls. Instead, she stood up and checked her watch. Only a little after eleven, but if the rest of them were feeling half as aggravated as she was, it was a good time for a break.

"Okay, everyone, how 'bout we stop for lunch?" A chorus of relieved sighs and muttered yeses answered her. Roy led them back to the outer cave, where they'd stashed a couple of coolers filled with sandwiches and drinks.

Annika started to follow, but Blake stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"Something's off here, I reckon."

"Yeah," she said. She had a pretty good idea what he was referring to. She'd been mulling over the discrepancies all morning. "It doesn't add up. A partial skeleton buried under hard-packed soil in one cave, probably by flooding. A complete one buried under soft-packed soil in another cave, with no evidence of flooding. Just laid out as pretty as can be."

"With a footprint nearby."

"What the fuck is going on here?" she said, more to herself than him. "If it's a hoax, it's the most elaborate one ever."

"I'm starting to think maybe it's not," Blake said, lowering his voice.

She glanced at his face, which was as expressionless as

she'd ever seen him.

"You really believe that…" she couldn't get the words out. "No. It's impossible. I'll grant you the possibility of bones that are five hundred years old. This island was barely colonized back then. The last vestiges of a prehistoric race clinging to their shrinking habitat, all their food sources extinct except for some birds, rats, and lizards? Yes, that's possible. Hell, I'll give you a hundred years, because back then the island still was relatively unpopulated."

Annika paced a few steps left and then back again. Stared at the area they'd excavated.

"But still alive today? A time when there are planes and helicopters flying overhead, hikers and scientists routinely exploring the jungles and mountains. When a goddamn cocaine plantation is only a couple of miles away."

Blake shrugged. "Look at the evidence. Those bones aren't a thousand years old. They're not even five hundred, not unless this dirt's got some magic properties we don't know about. The locals still talk about the Lao Ho'a. And that footprint…"

She shook her head. "So, you think some members of a *floresiensis* clan buried one of their dead up here? And then what, moved it and reburied it so we'd find it? Why?"

Another shrug. "I haven't a notion, luv. But I think we need to explore deeper into this mountain. If there's any proof,

it's going to be back there." Blake pointed down one of the tunnels.

"What makes you say that?"

"Funerary practices. A lot of ancient cultures placed their dead together in caves, on ledges and in cracks, rather than burying them. Any *floresiensis* remains have been found in caves. We've now got three here. The one Rudie and Kersen found, the one in the crack, and our buried friend. If the bodies got washed down here from somewhere else, it would be back there. If there's a recent population, maybe they ran out of room."

Annika considered his words. The Anastazi of the American southwest had placed their dead in shelves carved into the walls of caves. Many ancient tribes throughout the world had similar practices.

Was it really that far-fetched to think there might be more bodies deeper into the cave system?

"All right, we'll look. But not today." When Blake started to object, she raised her hand. "It would be hard to explain why you and I are giving up after only a few hours of work here. But I do think this spot's a dead end. So let's have half the team go back to the water runoff site in the other cave and expand the grid there. Maybe more partials will turn up. Tomorrow we'll explore a couple of your tunnels, assuming we don't find anything else here. We can say we want to trace the water flow

that led to the main cave."

"Alright, I see your point. We'll give it a fair go, then. In that case, let's grab some cut lunch, then. My belly's feeling emptier than this cave."

Happy to have him on board with her idea, Annika followed Blake back to the outer cave, where she was handed a peanut butter sandwiche and more disappointing news. The radio was officially dead, which meant they were totally cut off from the outside world unless they returned to their original campsite with its sporadic internet service, or went into town.

The rest of the day went no better. The main dig area turned up nothing and Danny's radar tests in other parts of the cave came up empty as well.

By the time they got back to camp in the evening, everyone was exhausted and the fervor of the previous night had worn away.

"Don't get discouraged," Blake told them, while he dished out bowls of thick soup accompanied by *roti gambang*, a crusty local bread their guards had brought with them from town. "This is part and parcel of field work. Despite all your research and mapping, it's still a bloody crapshoot. We got lucky yesterday. Now we just keep rolling the dice and hope we hit again."

His statement drew some muttered agreements and nods but no real enthusiasm. Annika wished she could add something but she

was just as dejected. She took her bowl and sat down next to Roy, who looked up and wrinkled his nose.

"What's the smell?"

Annika looked at her bowl, and then his.

"It's the same food."

"No. Not the food. Something stinks. Bad."

"I told you wankers to bag the garbage tight," Blake said from farther down the table. He smiled to take the sting from his words.

"I smell it, too." Steven Webster stood up and looked around. Matt Grundig waved his hand in front of his face and whispered something to Anton Schnell, who'd just come out of the latrine.

"Wasn't me," Anton said.

Before Annika could comment, the odor reached her. It was a definitely something rotten, so bad she almost gagged.

"Bloody hell, what's that pong?" Devon Mackenzie emerged from his tent holding his shirt over his nose.

A rustling from the brush sent Blake and Jeff Nelson scrambling for their rifles. Blake aimed one way and Jeff another. The sounds of movement increased and seemed to come from all directions at once.

"What is it?" Bernie Clarke asked, her eyes wide.

Motion to their left brought Blake's gun around. A monitor

lizard burst from the edge of the forest. Easily four feet long, it raced across the rocky ground right through the middle of camp. Shari let out a shriek. More rustling told them other animals were coming.

"Look out!" Blake shouted.

Annika dropped her bowl and got onto the table. Roy and Shari joined her. The rest of the team climbed onto the camp tables as well, which shook and threatened to collapse under weights they weren't meant to hold.

Several more lizards emerged from the undergrowth. Annika saw Komodo dragons mixed in with the more common water monitors. Despite their bulky shapes, they moved surprisingly fast. Forked tongues flicked out of spade-shaped jaws and they ran with an almost swimming motion, their bodies swaying from side to side. Another group appeared from a different side. The stench filling the camp grew worse. A Komodo raised up on its haunches, its head almost even with Annika's waist. Anton threw his bowl at the creature and it scurried away.

Another climbed halfway up a table. Rudie kicked at it and it snapped at him. Blake swung his rifle like a baseball bat and sent the five-foot lizard tumbling across the ground. Rudie and Matt jumped down and grabbed sticks from the pile of firewood. They waved them back and forth and shouted. Still, more and more lizards swarmed the campsite. Most of them seemed focused on

something at the other side but a few were attracted to the spilled food.

"Bugger off, you bastards!" Blake shouted. He pointed his rifle at the sky and fired two quick rounds. The blasts were extra loud as they echoed off the side of the volcano. But they had the desired effect, scattering the lizards back into the forest. A few of them knocked over chairs and lights in their mad dash for safety.

When it appeared they weren't returning, Blake came over to the table to help Annika down.

"Christ, that was—"

Someone screamed.

Annika turned and caught sight of an orange glow just as Roy shouted the most feared word in field camping.

"Fire!"

Chapter 18

Annika wanted to cry.

She also wanted to scream, throw a foot-stomping tantrum, and quite possibly kick the ever-living-shit out of someone.

But mostly cry.

The camp was lost.

The lizard swarm had knocked over two of the camp stoves during their stampede through the camp. The main tent plus several of the personal tents had gone up in flames, thanks to one of the mini stoves rolling across the ground, igniting everything in its path.

Blake and Jeff had reacted swiftly, racing into the sample prep tent for fire extinguishers, but the oiled canvas burned as fast as dry paper. Annika had frozen for a moment, until Devon Mackenzie bumped into her as he filmed the chaos.

That had broken her paralysis. There was no chance she was going to end up on the cover of National Geographic with a picture of a burning camp behind her.

She'd be branded as an indecisive laughingstock forever.

Seeing that Blake and Jeff were already spraying the fires, she kicked the stoves away from the tents and turned off the gas canisters. Then she joined Roy and Shari who were throwing tarps over the bone samples to protect them from the flame retardant.

Oily, black smoke clouded the camp and burned her nose. It seemed like hours, but in less than five minutes the fires had been put out.

It was four minutes too late.

They'd lost most of their protection from rain. The remaining tents were too small to triple up inside and they couldn't turn the prep tent into a sleeping area. They needed the samples and equipment to be protected at all times.

Only good luck and quick thinking had saved their supplies. From what she could see, only the tents were ruined. Still, that was more than enough to jeopardize the expedition.

How were they supposed to complete another five weeks without anywhere to sleep?

"Bloody lizard stampede, what's next?" Blake said, coming up next to her. For once he looked as flustered as Annika felt, his face red and his hair matted with sweat and soot.

"I've never heard of Komodos or any reptiles acting like that."

"Some animals will get spooked by earthquakes."

"No earth shake," Rudie said. Annika turned toward him. "Lizards only crazy when food near."

Blake glanced at Annika. "That stench."

"Shit." She ordered everyone to search the forest around the camp. "Be careful. Those Komodos could still be around."

It only took a minute for Jeff to wave his arms.

"Over here," he called.

Annika and Blake hurried over. Several half-rotted carcasses lay on the ground behind some thick brush. Hordes of flies buzzed around them. The stench was so bad she had to hold her sweat-soaked bandana over her nose. Bite marks were evident on the bodies where the monitors had torn chunks away before being frightened off.

Annika identified a small deer and two monkeys.

"More over here," Roy shouted from twenty yards away. Annika went over to see. This time the remains were in even worse shape; just bones scattered around with hunks of meat clinging to them.

"How could we have been right next to all those dead animals this whole time and we didn't even know?" Bernie asked.

"Because they weren't here." Blake angrily nudged a fur-covered leg with his boot. "We'd have smelled it long before this. My guess is some tosser dragged them here, prob'ly after our guards went home. We were all so tired we never noticed."

"But who—" Annika stopped as the answer came to her.

Reyes and his thugs. They were still trying to frighten her away. This time with deadly Komodo dragons.

"Fuck them," she whispered. Blake smiled and gave her shoulder a quick squeeze. Then he turned to Jeff and Anton.

"We've gotta move these corpses before those walking death machines come back. We'll toss them in the truck and then drive 'em somewhere."

"What about the other ones, the, uh, parts?" Roy asked.

"We can douse them with bleach," Annika said. "And then put them in garbage bags to move them." She told Blake she and the others could do that while he, Jeff, and Anton took care of the heavier animals.

"I think I'll stick around, just in case those lizards come back." Blake gestured with the rifle, and Annika shivered. She could read his grim expression and knew it wasn't reptiles he was worried about.

Jeff grabbed the deer by its back legs while Anton took the head. After a pause, Matt put on gloves and picked up the two monkeys. A few minutes later, the three men were driving off into the night, Rudie along with them to show them a place where they could dump the bodies safely. Bernie went to get the bleach.

"So, now what?" Blake asked in a soft voice, gesturing with his chin at the smoldering camp.

"They are not getting rid of us that easy," she said. "We can go into town, I'm sure they sell tents somewhere, and—"

"Beg pardon, but I've got a better solution."

Devon Mackenzie wore an impish grin.

"We've got the best possible shelter right above us." He pointed up the mountain. "Shelter from any rain storms, the air's cooler up there, and there's only one way in. Which means no one can sneak up on us."

Annika almost threw her arms around him. Instead, mindful of Blake's presence, she caught herself and settled for a high-five instead.

It was perfect!

Screw you, Reyes. You can't bully us.

"Okay, folks! Listen up. We're going to spend the night here, but in the morning we're moving our base of operations into the main cave. For now, let's pack up as much as we can and then try to get some sleep."

"And maybe do something to make sure those bloody dinosaurs don't sneak up on us so easily," Blake added. He gestured Steven Webster and Danny over and had them gather brush and lay it out around the perimeter of the camp to form a prickly wall.

Bernie came back with the bleach. Annika took one look at her ashen face and told her to go help Shari and Steven get started on boxing supplies up for the move.

"Looks like it's you and me," she said to Blake, who gave a rueful laugh as he took one of the bottles and started splashing it over the gruesome remains.

"The joys of being in charge," he said over his shoulder.

"Gotta say, this is gonna go down in the history books for craziest first time leading a dig."

"We're lucky no one got hurt." Like a key unlocking a door, her words released a flood of emotions as the gravity of it all—the deadly lizards, the threats at gunpoint, the fire—hit her hard and her legs gave way. She sat down on a nearby table as the reality of everything crashed over her.

A Komodo bite was always perilous, and often fatal. They carried all sorts of harmful bacteria in their mouths and had venom glands in their gums. The more a Komodo chewed on you, the worse your odds, as its saliva got into muscle and bloodstream.

Without swift medical attention, the odds of survival diminished rapidly.

If we had to take one or more people to the hospital, it would leave us seriously short-handed. And when the university found out, they might cancel the entire dig.

Which was exactly what the scar-faced henchman, Reyes, had hoped would happen.

Well, the joke was on them.

Never before had Annika wished serious harm on anyone, but as she looked around her ruined camp, she found herself hoping that when Mister Espinosa found out they were staying put in Flores, he'd take out his anger on Reyes in the worst of ways.

Her heart was just starting to slow down when Blake

straightened up, his eyes wide with shock.

"Fuck me dead!"

From the shelter of a large, vine-matted durian tree, the First watched and listened as one group of Tall Ones carried out its secretive attack on the other. Was there no end to the deviousness and violence of these people?

Now smoke rose from the sleeping place of the newcomers. Movement among the bushes told him Killer of Lizards and Black Bird had returned, but he'd heard their thoughts long before their footsteps.

—The many lizards caused much trouble. There was fire.—

The First pictured it for them as he'd seen it. Fire was something the People had learned when the first Tall Ones came from the larger islands, back when the People lived by the big water. But they had to stop using it when the time of hiding started so that the Tall Ones would not find them.

Killer of Lizards shook the heavy club he had stolen from the Tall Ones and stood up. Black Bird moved with him.

—They prepare to sleep in the caves of the people. We should end them now.—

—No.—

The other two stopped. Their thoughts registered confusion.

—Each time the Tall Ones from the new jungle try to harm the pale Tall Ones, the pale ones move closer to our homes. Now they will be inside the mountain that shakes. But they never harm the others in return. All they do is dig for old bones. We have seen them. They are happy with their bones. And they do not remove the trees and build their strange caves the way the others do. Soon, the pale ones will leave. But not the others. It is they who are the danger.—

Killer of Lizards and Black Bird frowned. They had rarely heard the First speak so much. But his words carried truth.

—Then let us end them the way we did the other members of their tribe.— Black Bird stomped his foot.

The First smiled. He had hoped the others would see this as the best path. The Tall Ones who grew the plants that stole sleep had caused much trouble since their arrival. Not only had they taken away much of the Peoples' land, but twice they had killed two of the People sent to watch them. Their weapons were more powerful than anything the First had ever seen; even more so than those the Elders spoke of from the times of long ago. It was those same weapons that had prevented the First from attacking the Tall Ones except when they were found far from their homes.

And now they had brought even more troubles to the People by forcing the pale ones right into the caves.

The First had believed this to be the end of the People. But now he thought perhaps there was a way to avoid the warnings of his dreams, and those of the Elders.

If the People killed all the Tall Ones who grew the bad plants and took away the trees, then maybe the troubles would stop and the path the Elders had seen would change.

And the People would be safe.

Emilio Carvalo put down his night vision binoculars. He couldn't believe Reyes' plan had worked.

But he'd seen it for himself. The *científicos* were packing their supplies. The *lizardos* had done much damage to the camp.

Setting up the trap hadn't been easy. Reyes kept a kind of disposal area at the far end of the fields, a shallow pit where he had the men toss any animals they shot during the course of their rounds, animals that threatened to ruin the crops or become nuisances around the compound. Deer and wild pigs, mostly. Some monkeys, including a couple of big ones that had approached the processing building. Considering how much of a mess the little monkeys made around the kitchens and trash bins, there were standing orders to shoot the big ones on sight.

The corpses were left to rot, and that in turn attracted the local monitor lizards. The lizards came in handy when Reyes

needed to dispose of the occasional snooping local or a *tourista* who wandered too close and saw something they shouldn't.

Moving the carcasses had been awful. But nothing compared to the danger of capturing so many *lizardos*; it had taken all of Reyes' *hombres de seguridad*, the security team, to carry out the dangerous mission. The field workers had shown them how to do it, using special baited traps that were sold in town. The lizards went in and a door swung down. Each trap had a handle on top to carry it safely.

Still, the men had worn the heavy gloves and tall boots of the field workers, who needed the protection from the deadly snakes that lived among the *cocaína* plants.

Everyone knew a bite from a Komodo was just as lethal.

It had taken them most of the day to get all the *lizardos* Reyes insisted on. And then transporting them close enough to the camp to smell the dead animals placed there but far enough away so that no one heard their vehicles.

Luckily, the *lizardos* has acted just as Reyes predicted.

Now it was time to report back to Reyes that the *científicos* were leaving.

Emilio motioned to his partner, Andres Ropero. They remained silent as they worked their way through the trees, keeping their eyes open in case any of the *lizardos* remained in the area. When the reached the point in the trail where they'd

left their truck, Emilio took out his phone.

"I will contact Reyes and—"

He stopped as he caught sight of dark shapes moving around the truck. Remembering the fates of Bautista and Zamora, he put a finger to his lips and indicated Ropero should go right while he went left. He drew his *pistola* and made his way around the front of the truck to the passenger side.

When he reached the bumper, he flicked on his flashlight.

Two pairs of eyes reflected the light back at him.

Emilio raised his gun but a terrible pain filled his skull before he could pull the trigger. He gasped and the gun fell from his hand. The shapes darted forward. One of them swung something—*a hammer?*—and there was a loud *crack!*

An instant later, agony raced through his leg and it collapsed under him. He fell onto the damp earth. Through tears of pain he saw furry bodies, too big to be monkeys. Then Ropero cried out and a second later he lay face-first on the ground, visible under the truck.

The monkey legs came closer. Voices whispered inside his brain but there were no words.

In image appeared, his own head crushed and bloody.

It was the last thing he knew.

Chapter 19

"Don't make a big stinko, but there's something you need to see."

Alarmed by his sudden change in manner, Annika approached Blake, who was shining his light on some of the bloody remains.

"What is it?" she asked, keeping her voice low like his. Anything that had him this spooked had to be pretty serious.

"Look." He pointed at the ground.

She did, covering her mouth and nose against the ripe odor of decomposed flesh. The poor light and putrefied state of the random parts made identifying most of them difficult. She recognized pieces of deer and pig based on the hides. A couple of furrier limbs likely belonged to monkeys. There were also some remains that were little more than bones with scraps of flesh clinging to them. Ribs, ulnas, a femur—

"What the…?" Annika knelt down, the foul odors of putrid meat no longer registering.

"Yeah, exactly," Blake said, while Annika picked up the thigh bone. Clumps of hair and flesh were still attached, but it was the size and shape that captured her attention.

Too large to be any of the native monkeys. And the contours were definitely not human.

"It can't be," she whispered, turning it over in her hands.

Bits of rotten skin and muscle fell off.

But even in the poor light, there was no mistaking it for anything else.

Homo floresiensis.

Annika's heart slammed against her ribs. Her hands shook so badly she almost dropped the bone.

This was no fossil. It wasn't hundreds of years old, or even decades.

It was fresh.

A few weeks. Maybe even less than that, she corrected herself, factoring in the temperature and humidity of the jungle.

"We have to get everyone over here. We need to go through all these bones and search the perimeter of the camp for any others. The lizards might've dragged some off."

"That means letting the whole bunch in on the secret," Blake said.

"I know. But we don't have a choice. We'll make sure no one can leak the truth. We already don't have a radio. We'll collect everyone's phones and no one is allowed to go to the village unless you or I are with them. Including Rudie's friends. Anyone who doesn't like it, we'll remind them they all signed a non-disclosure agreement. Any announcements about discoveries made on this expedition have to go through me."

"Crikey, this is some goddamned mess."

Annika wasn't sure if Blake meant the pile of rotting parts in front of them or the fact that their entire expedition premise had just gone off the rails into uncharted territory.

And she didn't care.

The discovery of recent *H. floresiensis* skeletons would have earned her anthropological fame.

This went so far beyond that it was literally territory no other scientist had ever been in before.

Which meant taking absolutely no chances on screwing it up.

"There's one more thing," Blake said, gently gripping her arm before she could wave to the others. "Over here."

He moved a few feet to one side.

In a small patch of dirt was a footprint.

The imprint was remarkably clear in the soft earth. She could make out the impressions of five toes plus the foot itself.

"One of the men who dragged the animals here?" she asked. Then she corrected herself. The print was too small and soldiers wouldn't be walking barefoot. The more she stared at it, other anomalies became obvious. There was no arch. The toes were unusually long. "It's just like the print in the cave."

"Righto. And no monkey in these parts has feet that big."

A shiver ran down Annika's back.

She thought about some of the things that had happened since they'd arrived, like the attack on Danny Chen. What if it hadn't all been Reyes' men?

Members of a *Homo floresiensis* tribe might've been watching them this whole time.

And they might also be dangerous.

"I think we need to be more careful when we explore the caves," Blake said, patting the revolver at his waist. She still had his two-shot gun, but it was in her tent. She made a silent promise to carry it everywhere from now on.

"And here's something else to think about," he continued. "What happens if we actually come across one of those buggers?"

Annika shook her head. She had no answer to that. Even bringing home pieces of a freshly-killed body was going to turn the scientific world upside down. It would possibly spell the end of *H. floresiensis* as a race; the influx of scientists to the island would most likely push them into extinction.

On the other hand, if they were already close to that point, it might be a chance to save them.

And if they attack? What then, Annika?

Could she allow her people to fight back? To kill primitive hominins that were definitely intelligent?

To commit murder?

With a part of her wishing they hadn't made any of their

discoveries, she called out for the rest of the team to come over.

What's done is done, she told herself.

All she could do was hope she handled everything correctly.

"Dammit!"

Arnold Worthington slammed his office phone back into the cradle.

"Is this a bad time?" Amar Gupta asked from the door. It was just after nine in the morning. He'd arrived at his office and found a message from the Head of Anthropology asking him to come see him immediately.

"More than bad. Goddamned awful." Worthington mopped his face with a handkerchief and motioned for the lab manager to sit down. "I just got off the phone with Butin Nasution in Jakarta. There's still no word from Annika. He spoke to the local National Police chief. Get this. There's been trouble on Flores. Some Indonesian Army soldiers went rogue and threatened Annika and her team. Now the soldiers are MIA as well."

"What are they doing about it?"

"Not a damned thing! He says he has no authority on Flores or with the army. He's going to call his counterpart in the nearest town to the campsite. They might send someone. Might!"

"There has to be something else we can do."

Worthington frowned and then smacked his hand on the desk.

"There is. Pack a bag. We're taking the first flight tomorrow."

"This is unbelievable."

Annika had to agree with Roy's simple assessment.

She, Blake, Roy, and Jeff stood around the largest camp table. The whole team had spent hours collecting all the bones from areas around the camp where the carcasses had been dumped or the monitor lizards had dragged pieces off to eat them. The bodies from the truck had been unloaded and brought over as well.

Staring at the remains, she said a silent thank you for having the foresight to minor in forensic anthropology during her graduate program. At the time, she'd thought it would help her identify marks on bones.

Now she hoped it would tell her not only cause of death, but give her an idea of how long the creatures had been dead.

All in all, it looked like they had sections of two bodies. Possibly three. Annika would be able to tell better after the bones were stripped and cleaned.

Several ribs, three femurs, two ulnas, two humeri, a

scapula, half a pelvis.

And the most amazing find of all, a complete skull with part of the face still intact.

Rudie and one of his friends from town had found it about a hundred yards from camp. They'd followed a bloody trail and discovered a medium-sized monitor chewing on it.

A skull. No, not a skull, a head! A no-doubt-about-it actual *Homo floresiensis* head.

It was badly decomposed, like the other body parts. The eyes and tongue were gone and so was one ear. Half the scalp was missing, along with the cheek and most of the nose on that side. The brain was basically mush and infested with maggots. The whole thing stunk to high heaven and Annika couldn't have been happier.

Once everything was laid out on the table, she'd ordered everyone to step back so Devon could photograph each item from every possible angle. He'd already videoed the entire process of collection and identification, with Annika narrating the entire time.

Unbelievable.

Her thoughts kept circling back to that one word.

I'm standing here, looking at the face of a man who shouldn't even exist.

What made it even more amazing was how accurate all the

facial reconstructions of Flores Man had been. The flattened nose. Ears rather large for the head, which was small in comparison to the body by modern human standards but fairly common for many of the more primitive members of the *Homo* family tree. The brow ridge wasn't as pronounced as she'd expected and the chin was rounded but still slightly protruding, neither prognathic like Australopithecines nor completely orthognathic like modern humans.

The skin was dark, darker than the natives of the island, but not the near-black that so many illustrations had predicted. Definitely not as dark as the aboriginal tribes of Australia, which the face resembled more than slightly in both size and shape. Further proof that as a species Flores Man had adapted millennia ago to life in the jungle, spending a good portion of its time out of direct sunlight. Maybe even hiding during the day and only hunting or foraging during dusk and dawn.

The mouth was wide for the size of the head and the lips—what remained of them—thick. Behind them was the easily recognizable dentition of *H. floresiensis*. Advanced molars but primitive canines and premolars, a combination of dental traits not found in any other hominin species. Both her work, and Blake's, on the dentition of Flores Man aligned with a theory previously put forth that Flores Man might be an offshoot of *Homo habilis* rather than the Australopithecine line. Now, with a

complete set of teeth from one individual to work with, they'd be able to do a comprehensive analysis.

Blake tapped a metal probe against the top of the skull, where whitish bone showed through gaps in the skin and coarse hair.

"You realize what this means?" he asked.

She shook her head. There were so many possible answers to that question, she had no idea which one he was referring to.

"The brain. Even though it's all decayed, we can still have it examined. And we can study the entire brain case. This is the first example that's nearly complete. We can get a real idea of how smart they are, how they think."

She noticed he was already using the present tense.

"Doctor Annika." Rudie tugged at her sleeve. Behind him were the other three young men from the village. All of them looked upset.

"What wrong?" she asked.

"This is not good. You should bury those," he said, pointing at the body parts. "Do not make the Lao Ho'a angry."

"Angry? But we didn't hurt them. We didn't do this. The bad people did."

Rudie shook his head.

"My grandfather used to tell how sometimes hunters saw the little people in the forest. They always run and hide. Afraid of

humans. But if you got too close, bad things happened. Hunters die."

Annika bit her lip. Before tonight, she'd have laughed off Rudie's story as superstition. But now, knowing that Flores Man still existed, had most likely been watching them the whole time, she couldn't help but wonder if they were in danger.

They also needed to get the bones and remains out of the jungle as fast as possible. They hadn't come prepared to preserve organic samples. For something this size, they'd need special shipping containers and dry ice to stave off further decomposition and then she'd have to arrange for immediate transport to the US.

"We'll be careful," she told Rudie. "But we can't bury these. They're a great scientific discovery. More so than even the bones we found in the caves. Here's what we have to do." She turned to Blake. "Rudie and I will go back to the village. I'll contact Worthington and fill him in, and arrange to have the samples transported. Then I'll come back with the ice and boxes. You move everyone to the cave, like we planned."

"We need to look for them," Blake said, and she nodded.

"We will. But getting those remains back to the states is the number one priority right now."

"Is it?" He gave her a look that she had no trouble interpreting.

Drug lords. Assassins. And now possibly deadly primitive hominins with vengeance on their minds.

Their number one priority wasn't the bones.

It was staying alive.

Chapter 20

"Señor Espinosa, we have a problem."

Herve Espinosa looked up from his laptop. Ernesto Reyes stood at the door, his expression a mix of fear and fury. Between that and the tone of his voice—and the fact that he never used the word *señor* except in the most serious of situations—Espinosa knew there was very bad news coming.

"What is it?"

"Carvalo and Ropero. They are dead."

"Mierde!" Espinosa slammed the laptop closed. "How?"

Reyes quickly provided the details. He hadn't heard from the two men he'd assigned to wreck the scientists' camp, and they didn't respond when he called them. So he'd sent two more men to find them. They'd discovered the bodies next to the truck. Both of them had crushed skulls.

"Their guns not fired. They were ambushed. My men snuck close to the camp and saw the científicos packing their things. Much of the camp looked damaged."

"Are your men still there?"

Reyes nodded. "They have loaded the bodies into the truck but are awaiting orders of what to do next."

Espinosa rose and went to the windows. It was another hot and humid day, with a threat of rain. From where he stood,

everything looked *perfecto*. The fields were delivering good yields and the processing of the *cocaína* was running smoothly.

Yet those damned *científicos* were going to ruin everything.

Now they, or likely their native guards, had killed two more of his men. Men that would be hard to replace from across the world, unless he brought in soldiers from Jakarta. But with Sasmi gone—again, thanks to the *científicos*—he no longer had any leverage there. And he obviously couldn't trust the natives in town.

"We have played nicely," he said, and Reyes' eyes lit up, knowing what was coming next. "Now we teach them a real lesson. These científicos, they come from a large university, yes?"

Reyes nodded. "Two. The United States and Australia."

"Good. That means they have dinero. Let us see if they are willing to spend some of it to make sure their people and bones return home alive."

"Inmediatamente!" Reyes saluted and exited the room.

Espinosa wondered what a big *universidad* would pay for the return of their people. He almost hoped they would refuse; right now, the thought of killing the *científicos* was more enticing than just sending them home.

"That was Reyes." Edgar Marin put away his phone and looked at Raul Marquez, who had just finished loading the body of

Emilio Carvalo into the other truck. His bloody corpse lay next to Ropero's. "We have new orders. Leave the truck and the bodies here. We are to capture one of the *científicos* and bring them to Reyes."

"How? They have guns. And they are not afraid of us." Marquez gestured at the two dead men.

Before Marin could answer, a sound reached them over the general noises of the jungle.

A vehicle was approaching.

Marin smiled. "Perhaps this will be easier than we thought."

Annika gripped the steering wheel tight as she navigated the bumpy dirt road. Next to her, Rudie hung on with both hands to avoid being flung around.

She hated the idea of leaving the camp; she hadn't slept all night and even now she had this terrible feeling that something would happen to the *H. floresiensis* bodies while she was gone. She wished she could've sent Roy, or even Blake, but she had to speak with Worthington herself. The arrangements needed to be exact and kept totally secret. The only reason she'd brought Rudie was in case she needed a translator in town.

As they rounded a turn a flash of light momentarily blinded her. She let up on the gas and then slammed on the brakes as the

cause was revealed.

A green pickup truck blocked the road ahead.

A dangerous-looking man in khakis stood by it, a rifle in his hand and a nasty grin on his face. She didn't recognize him but she felt certain he worked for Reyes.

"Get out," the man called to her, motioning with his gun. He had a thick Spanish accent. Rudie gasped. Annika looked in the rearview mirror. If she could back away quickly and then turn around, maybe they could—

A second man stepped out of the trees into the path behind her truck, his rifle aimed at them.

They were trapped.

"We do not want to hurt you," the first man called out. "Señor Espinosa simply wants to speak with you. Then we will return you to your camp."

Something in his smile told her they would be bringing her to see the drug lord no matter what. Better to do it without a bullet in her. The fact that he'd used Espinosa's real name was another clue that they were deadly serious. She told Rudie to exit the truck slowly with his hands in the air.

"Don't do anything," she whispered. "He's not going to kill us. That would bring the whole government down on him."

She hoped she was right and that Espinosa wasn't some kind of crazy person, that he wouldn't put his entire empire in

jeopardy just to get rid of some scientists working too close to his cocaine fields. She reminded herself that there'd never been a modern case of an anthropologist in Africa or Asia murdered by warlords or violent tribes. Most of the time they could be negotiated with. If it came to that, Annika was willing to use the rest of her funds for bribery. Money could always be replaced.

Lives couldn't.

She stepped out, very aware of the tiny gun in her pocket. If she had the chance, would two shots be enough to gain their freedom? And what would Espinosa do then?

She didn't want to become a prisoner—or worse—but she also didn't want to start a war with a drug lord who just happened to have a small army working for him.

"Let's go," the first man said. The second man came around to join him, his gun still trained on them. Now she could see they were both sweating heavily and their clothes were stained with what looked very much like blood.

She had the sinking feeling they didn't want her for just a threatening conversation.

"Where are taking us?"

"Move. Rapido," the first man ordered, any pretense at politeness gone. He motioned again with his gun, indicating she should get in the pickup. Annika hesitated. The swarthy man

didn't. He seized her by the arm and dragged her toward the truck.

Rudie shouted and turned to run but the second man grabbed him and threw him to the ground.

"Leave him alone!" Annika shouted. "He's just a kid."

"Silencio!" The first man slapped her and she stumbled, her eyes tearing and her cheek on fire. Before she could gain her balance he pushed her roughly into the back seat and slammed the door. His partner shoved Rudie in from the other side and delivered a sharp blow to his leg with the butt of the rifle. Rudie yelped in pain and fell across the seat.

The first man got behind the wheel and kept an eye on them while the second moved her truck off the path and into the brush. She caught sight of a second vehicle but before she could get a good look the man climbed into the front passenger seat and aimed a large pistol at her.

"Do not make me use this." He looked as if he wanted any excuse to pull the trigger.

Annika leaned back as the driver turned the truck around and headed down the road. The pickup stunk of sweat and mildew. The seats were torn in several places and there were no seat belts. From the way they got tossed around by every bump in the road, it seemed the shocks had seen better days as well.

"It's going to be fine," she whispered to Rudie. Her

stinging cheek and watering eyes belied her words. He shook his head.

"Not good. Bad people."

"Don't forget, the police already know they've threatened us. They'll know right where to look as soon as Doctor Downey realizes we're missing."

"Maybe too late by then," Rudie said. "Police here work very slow."

The SUV took a sharp turn that threw the boy against her, and her against the door. She briefly considered opening the door and jumping out, like in the movies. They weren't going that fast and the road was dirt, not pavement.

Then she thought better of it. With her luck, she'd break an arm or leg. Then she'd really be in trouble.

More trouble than being kidnapped and on the way to see a murderous drug lord who you dead gone? How's that for crazy.

Panic threatened to rise up and she forced it down as the truck took another violent turn. They were definitely heading in a different direction than either town or back to camp. Deeper into the jungle.

Think, Miss Expedition Leader. What would Donald Johanson or George Latimer do? They'd been in plenty of dangerous situations in Africa. So had the Leakeys.

Talk. The teams on those expeditions had rarely needed to

resort to violence, with the exception of having armed guards around camp. Talk. Lie. Agree to anything if it meant Espinosa set them free. Then they could bring in the police or even the army later.

She was still contemplating her options when Rudie sat up straighter. She looked out the windshield and saw that jungle was opening up ahead of them. On one side of the path was a huge field filled with row after row of tall, thin bush-like plants. On the other were several hastily constructed buildings that looked like garages or storage units. She was sure that two of them were simply commercial shipping containers that had been dropped into the jungle and had doors and windows cut into them. All of them had multiple air conditioning units sticking out the sides.

Beyond those was a long, single-story house made of wood and cement. It had a large veranda on one side. The roofs of all the structures had been painted in green camouflage. Several armed guards stood in front of the house, and more of them were stationed in pairs around the other buildings.

So this is what a cocaine plantation looks like.

She wished she'd never had the opportunity to see it.

The truck slowed as it approached the house. Two guards walked over. The driver spoke a few words in Spanish to them, too rapid for Annika to make out anything but the words Espinosa

and scientific. The guards waved them forward and they drove right up to the house, parking next to another pickup that was identical to the one they rode in.

The two men got out and opened the back doors. Annika and Rudie were dragged out and led to the veranda. They crossed the wide porch and went into a room that looked nothing like what she'd expected. The walls were made of dark wood and one side had floor-to-ceiling windows. The floor was all tile. At one end sat an oversized ornate desk made of some expensive wood, mahogany or something similar. A high-backed chair completed the impression that they were in some senior executive's office, not the home of an international cartel chief.

Two smaller chairs faced the desk. The kidnappers pushed Annika and Rudie into the chairs and then took several steps back.

A second door opened and two other men entered. Annika recognized one of them immediately by his terrible scar. Ernesto Reyes, the thug who'd already threatened her life. The man with him was taller and thinner. He wore a white suit with a black shirt and shoes. His thinning black hair was slicked back and mostly hidden under a matching white Panama hat that sported a black band. Small pockmarks covered his cheeks, but Annika couldn't tell if they were from a childhood disease or some kind of injury.

But it was his eyes that drew Annika's attention. Dark as obsidian, with the cold, heartless feel of a crow's gaze. They were the eyes of a man with no conscience, a man who would happily order her death without a second thought.

That such a man had basically given up all pretense of hiding his identity and escalated things from simple violence to kidnapping caused a shiver to run down Annika's back. Her estimation of their leaving the house alive sank even further.

Before he even introduced himself, she knew who he was, and that she was in the presence of a very dangerous man.

"Buenos dias, Doctora Vahle. I am Herve Espinosa. Welcome to my home." Espinosa gave a short bow and then sat down in his chair. "I believe you have already met my asistente, Ernesto Reyes."

The scarred man didn't nod or speak. But hatred burned in his eyes. Where Espinosa exuded power, Reyes brimmed with barely controlled fury.

"I apologize for bringing you here in such a manner," Espinosa continued. "But you and your cientificos have caused me much trouble. Four of my men are dead and your presence is bringing too much attention to my work."

Dead?

Rudie whispered something under his breath and Espinosa glanced at him. For a brief second his expression grew angry.

Then his mask of cool aloofness returned.

"We haven't killed anyone," Annika said, her surprise showing in her voice. "All we want is to explore the caves of Wai Sano and then go home. I don't care what you do here."

"Four of my men are dead!" Espinosa shouted, rising from his chair. Rudie gasped and Annika leaned back, positive he was going to pull a gun and shoot them right there. "Their skulls were crushed! Now you and your people will pay."

"Wait!" Annika said, a terrible thought coming to her. "Your men… did it happen in the jungle?"

"So you do know about them."

"No, I swear." Annika shook her head. She hated revealing the secret of Wai Sano, but if doing so kept her and her team alive, then she could make sure the Flores tribe was protected later. "We were attacked as well. A man was knocked unconscious. We thought your people did it. But we've discovered… there are others out there. A primitive tribe living in the caves. The locals call them the Ebu Gogo. The little people."

Espinosa laughed, but there was no humor in it. "You expect me to believe such a ridiculous story?"

"It's true. We came here to look for the bones of these prehistoric hominins. But the corpses your men placed outside camp. There were two bodies that shouldn't possibly exist. Short, hairy, and they walk on two legs."

"Monos," Reyes said, almost spitting out the word.

"No, not monkeys. Larger."

Reyes shrugged. "Big monkeys, small monkeys. We have killed many."

"There are no large monkeys on Flores. No chimps, no baboons, nothing like that. You killed primitive people, like… like…" she struggled to find the right word, knowing this wasn't the time or place for a scientific lecture. "Cave men. And I think you made them angry."

"Cállate la boca!" Espinosa gestured at the guards. "I will not listen to your estupido lies. Lock them up while I decide what to do with them."

Rough hands grabbed Annika's arms. Espinosa's men took her and Rudie out of the house and to one of the smaller metal buildings, the size of a large shed. They were tossed into the dark, windowless space and the door locked after them.

The clang of the lock still ringing in her ears, Annika felt around until her hands found one of the walls, the metal hot from the tropical sun.

She was about to ask Rudie if he was alright when a man's voice spoke from the darkness.

"He is going to kill us."

Chapter 21

Blake checked his watch and frowned.

Where the hell was Annika?

The last of the equipment and supplies had been set up in the outer cave. The remains of the tents had been repurposed into tarps so that no one had to lay their sleeping bags on dirt. It had taken most of the day and multiple trips up and down Wai Sano to lug everything up to their new shelter.

Now they were finally finished and the whole team was sitting around, too exhausted to even think about food. Everyone was hot, sweaty, and covered in grime.

Plus, they'd needed to find a place for the dunny, which for sanitary reasons couldn't be in the cave. Steven Webster had located a semi-level area almost a hundred meters away, which meant you'd be risking a serious fall if you wanted to have splash or bog after dark. As for the shower, there was nowhere to set it up. For the rest of the trip they'd have to take turns bathing in one of the streams that trickled down the slopes.

Even with all that going on, he'd been unable to take his mind off Annika. He'd expected her to be gone all day; the wheels of government turned mighty slow in Indonesia, and she'd have to speak with the police and other officials not only in town but also in Jakarta. And also get in touch with the folks

at Case Western and arrange for transport of the samples. Then locate the dry ice and boxes they'd need to pack and ship the samples.

Definitely an all-day trip.

Only now it was nearing sunset, she and Rudie still weren't back, and he was cursing himself for not going with her.

Something had happened, he was sure of it. The possibilities whirled around in his head as he tried to keep himself busy by setting up the camp stoves for the evening meal. A flat tire. Engine trouble. Problems with ratbag police or politicians who were on Espinosa's payroll.

Espinosa's thugs.

"Bloody hell." He couldn't just sit around wondering if she was okay. Odds were good they were either running late or they'd had car trouble. Either way, a little jaunt down the road toward town would answer his questions. And ease his mind.

He called Liem and Hari and told them they were taking a ride. Then he pulled Roy and Jeff aside and filled them in.

"I'm going with you," Roy said, but Blake shook his head.

"No. I need you two to stay here and keep the camp secure. You've both got rifles. I'm leaving you the truck; we'll take Liem's ute. One of you stay just outside the cave entrance. If we're not back by morning, you'll need to go into town and get the whole damned army looking for us."

Blake and the two locals climbed into the beat-up utility vehicle they'd brought from town. It looked like it was ready to fall apart with the first good bump but they'd driven back and forth several times in it without any breakdowns, so he figured it ran better than it looked. God knew he'd seen—and driven—worse back home in the outback.

Hari assured him that finding their way after nightfall wouldn't be a problem. Blake took the back seat so he could keep an eye on both sides of the path. Despite that, it ended up being Liem who spotted the Annika's truck and another vehicle behind some shrubs.

"Lihat!" he shouted, pointing to their right. Blake jumped out before the truck stopped moving. A quick check of the camp vehicle showed no physical damage and no one inside. When he opened the back of the other pickup, the unmistakable odor of blood and shit hit him like a fist.

"Fuck me dead!" Blake stumbled away from the truck. After letting the air clear a little, he crept forward. Two men lay in the back, both covered in blood. They wore the same khakis as Espinosa's bruisers.

Both of their skulls were crushed.

Brain and bone peeked through the massive dents in their heads.

"Ebu Gogo," Hari said, leaning past Blake to look at the

corpses. “Not good. Angry.”

“How do you know?” Blake asked him.

Liem picked up a thick branch.

“Their way. Sneak up. Hit.” He swung the branch like a club.

“You think they got Annika and Rudie, too?”

“Nuh. Look.” Hari pointed at the path ahead, which was illuminated by the truck’s headlights. Blake immediately saw what the teenager had noticed. Tire tracks, fresh enough that they hadn’t been erased by the light rain earlier in the day.

“Bad men take them,” Liem said.

“And probably not to town. Can you show me where the bad men live?”

Liem nodded. “You need more people. Lots of men there. Lots of senjata,” he added, mimicking pointing a rifle.

Blake thought for a moment. They’d do Annika no good if they ended up dead or captured. And some scientists with a couple of guns wasn’t exactly Special Ops Command. The smartest thing would be to go for the police. Except he wasn’t sure the local coppers could be trusted.

“All right,” he said. “We go back to camp. Some of us will see if we can get Annika and Rudie out of there. And we’ll send a couple of folks into town for the police.”

Blake snapped a few pictures of the two vehicles and the

grisly remains and then they drove back to camp. Along the way, he cursed their lack of a radio, his anxiety level rising up another notch. Then he cursed the slow speed they had to take because of the darkness and the poor condition of the path.

Plus, they still had to climb back up Wai Sano in the dark.

As each minute passed, his conviction that something was very wrong continued to grow until it was a physical pain in his head.

Too late, too late.

Despite the dangerous footing, he increased his speed.

—They defile our dead. We must stop them.—

The First looked at Black Bird. The People murmured, their thoughts unsettled. Some agreed with him. Others expressed the same uncertainty that resided in the First's heart. The words of the Elders had been frustratingly unclear. He had visited them again because the future contained too many branches for him to follow. Their words had been brief and more confusing than ever.

The time for action arrives. The world pivots and the defilers must be dealt with. Your enemy is your weapon.

Defilers. And now Black Bird had unknowingly used the same word.

Was that a sign?

The Tall Ones in the jungle had killed some of the People. And now that debt had been paid. Two for one, as the Law said.

But the new Tall Ones, the Diggers of Bones, were no longer satisfied with what they had found. Like all Tall Ones, they were greedy and wanted more. They were going to take the bodies of the dead, of the First's own people.

That could not be allowed.

Yet, the Diggers of Bones were also at war with the Tall Ones in the Jungle. If the People did nothing, perhaps the two tribes of Tall Ones would eliminate each other.

Black Bird scowled at him, growing impatient for an answer the First did not yet have.

The wrong choice could doom the People.

As could no choice.

The ground rumbled beneath them. The walls shook and bits of dirt and rock rained down. Another sign. The Earth Mother was anxious as well.

His dream returned to him. The red blood of the Earth cleansing the mountain and burning all the People to ash.

The end of everything.

She was not anxious. She was angry. Angry with the Tall Ones. And angry with him, for his inaction.

The world pivots and the defilers must be dealt with.

The First stood and stared at the People, his decision

made.

—We will have our justice. First the Diggers of Bone. Then the Tall Ones of the jungle. This is the land of the People and no more shall we share it.—

The People rose and their silent cheers filled his head. The adults picked up their weapons while those too young or old to fight moved deeper into the caves.

With Killer of Lizards and Black Bird by his side, the First led the rest to their destiny.

There would be no going back now.

"Ow!"

Roy Fishman turned in time to see Shari Zhara drop the box she'd been moving. He had a momentary thought she might've cut herself but then she grabbed the sides of her head and fell to her knees.

"Shari! What's the—" The rest of his question froze in his throat as an invisible knife stabbed his brain. He gasped and his vision blurred. He was dimly aware of other voices crying out.

As quickly as it had come, the pain disappeared. Roy blinked and his eyes cleared.

Just in time to see something that shouldn't exist coming

at him with a large stick.

They were still several hundred yards from the cave when the ground shook and sent Blake to his knees. At the same time, the dull ache in his head intensified to a blinding pain.

Behind him, Liem and Hari gasped. He thought he heard a distant scream and then his pulse thudded in his ears, drowning out all other sounds. Stars went supernova in front of his eyes. The world spun around him in dizzying fashion, like he'd had too many whiskeys.

Then it all vanished.

In the space of a heartbeat, the pain disappeared and with it his nausea. He opened his eyes to find he was on his belly, the dampness of the soil already seeping through his clothes. He rolled over and saw Liem and Hari on their hands and knees. Blake recovered his flashlight and shined it on them.

"You two alright?"

Liem nodded. Hari stared at the ground, spittle hanging from his mouth. A puddle of vomit stained the rocks under him. His body shook and then he wiped his face.

"Okay. The mountain is unhappy."

"That makes two of us. C'mon," Blake said, standing up. "We've got to rattle our dags. No telling how bad the damage to

the camp from that shaker."

He helped the two teens to their feet and made sure they had their balance. Then he resumed the hike up the mountain. The tremor hadn't been as bad as some of the others, but even though his headache had disappeared his sense of danger had increased.

Somewhere above them, someone screamed.

Followed by a gunshot.

"Hurry!" Throwing caution out the window, Blake put on more speed. His feet and hands slipped on the damp rocks. He fell and banged his knee. But years of mountain climbing paid off. He reached the cave entrance and rushed in with his pistol in hand.

The entire team lay motionless on the ground. The only light came from lanterns and flashlights that had been knocked over.

Something moved in the shadows at the back of the cave. Blake raised his gun.

A pair of eyes appeared, softly luminescent in the dim glow of the lamps. Then another pair. And another.

Behind him, a voice whispered.

"Ebu Gogo."

A rustling noise behind him let him know they were surrounded. Before he could turn, a heavy blow struck the back of his head.

And then there was only darkness and pain.

Chapter 22

Annika woke with a gasp and then groaned as various aches and pains came to life.

Just a dream, she told herself, but it didn't feel that way. She'd been in a dark place, a cave. Surrounded by short, hairy hominins. Several of them carried the bodies of dead tribe members. These were placed on the ground with their legs straight and their arms at their sides. Their causes of death were obvious even in the poor light.

They'd been shot.

Annika tried to follow what was happening but the images kept jumping, as if she were watching a damaged movie. One of the hominins, a male with scatters of gray in its hair, stepped forward to place some kind of plant leaves on the bodies. Its large, dark eyes expressed a very human-like sadness as it regarded its fallen companions. When it finished, others repeated the ceremony, males and females alike placing their leafy offerings on the corpses. Then, one by one, the bodies were lifted and carried into another cave.

The scene shifted again and now Annika was in the jungle. A group of men, dressed in linen shirts and trousers, stood in a rough circle within a small clearing. They held old-fashioned rifles and pistols. She realized she was seeing something that

had happened hundreds of years in the past. One of them said something in a language she couldn't make out but it sounded German, or perhaps Dutch.

Without warning, all of them dropped their weapons and clutched at their temples. A moment later, more of the hominins burst from the trees and brutally attacked the men with clubs, stone knives, and short spears.

In moments, the men lay in a bloody heap.

The hominins slunk back into the jungle.

Just like in the cave, none of them uttered a sound.

Annika felt sure there was more to the dream, but it was already fading from her memory.

A few feet away, Rudie moaned in his sleep but didn't wake. They were alone in the shed. Two of Espinosa's men, who appeared to be Jakartans rather than Colombians, had come earlier in the day and taken away the other prisoner. He'd resisted, kicking and screaming until one of the guards slammed the butt of a rifle into his stomach.

Annika hadn't been able to find out much about the man during the short time they'd been imprisoned together. With Rudie translating, she'd learned his name was Parto and he had worked in the fields for Espinosa, along with many other local men. They knew Espinosa was bad, but he paid good money to pick the *kokain*.

Then one day some of the bad men had killed two of the Ebu Gogo. The little people had been caught peering into windows at the main house. That had frightened Parto and two of his friends, because they knew the Ebu Gogo would be angry and want revenge. So they tried to run away, thinking they would go back to their village. But Reyes' men had shot two of them and captured Parto.

"Bos Reyes, he will kill me, too. And you. There is a pit. He feeds the bodies to the dragons. Us. You. The little ones. You see."

Annika had tried to get more information out of him about the little people he'd seen but as soon as she asked, he shook his head, covered his ears, and crawled into a corner. He'd stayed like that until the guards dragged him out.

She and Rudie had spent the rest of the day sweating in the wretched heat and mostly lost in their own thoughts. Hers had centered on the Ebu Gogo, the concept of which she was still having trouble making real in her head. Three weeks ago, the idea that *H. floresiensis* still survived less than five thousand years ago seemed a remote but conceivable possibility, one that would make the scientific world stand on its head. And now in the space of three days they'd gone from five thousand years to five hundred, then a couple of decades, and now to having a tribe of them still alive on the island and actively killing

people.

It was almost too much for her to handle. Her mental distress was even more overwhelming than her physical injuries and exhaustion. It was as if she'd been transported into an alternate universe. Or the plot of a movie like *Jurassic Park* and she was playing the role of Alan Grant, confronted by creatures from Earth's distant past come to life.

At some point, the whole mess had become too difficult to contemplate and her brain had shut down.

Only to have the impossible follow her into her dreams.

Now she was awake, though, and for the first time she wondered what had roused her.

Then she felt it.

An almost imperceptible vibration against her back, as if an electrical current ran through the metal wall of the shed. Like leaning against a speaker turned to high volume but with no music playing.

Something's happening.

No sooner had she thought it than the ground trembled. Lightly at first and then quickly escalating to a full-blown tremor. The walls and roof rattled and the ground shook. Rudie woke with a start and called out.

"Doctor Annika!"

"I'm right here, Rudie. It's just another quake."

Only it didn't seem to be. It was more violent than any of the others and she had a terrible vision of her team up in the cave, the walls and ceiling collapsing onto them.

No, Blake wouldn't let that happen. He'll keep everyone safe.

With a final shudder that caused the metal building to rumble like thunder, the tremor came to an end. She turned toward Rudie but before she could speak, pain exploded behind her eyes and she pressed both hands against her temples.

Just like the people in her dream.

The ache increased. It was like her head was a boiler and the pressure inside was growing too great. Rudie whimpered and curled into a ball. Outside, people shouted and a gun went off.

An image appeared in her mind.

The gray-haired hominin.

Then the pain vanished and everything was dark again.

Herve Espinosa sat up and groaned. Early morning light came in through the windows, telling him he'd been unconscious for at least an hour, if not more. A dull ache lingered in his skull, but nothing like the pain that had struck him earlier.

Monkeys but not monkeys. Hair creatures with angry faces.

He'd seen glimpses of something in his head, right before he… passed out?

Or was it just his imagination, triggered by the lady científica's *relatos exagerados*, her tall tales?

"Jefe!" Ernesto Reyes burst into the office with two of his men. Espinosa waved to him.

"Estoy bien," he said, righting his chair so he could sit. His legs still shook. "How much damage?"

Espinosa expected there to be more than usual. All the pictures had fallen from their hooks and several large cracks ran up the walls and across the ceiling. White plaster dust covered everything. One of the windows was cracked as well.

"Much," Reyes said, confirming Espinosa's thought. "But nothing we cannot repair. However…"

The way Reyes paused told Espinosa there was worse news coming.

"Qué?"

"Hay tres hombres muertos."

Three men dead? His thinking still muddled from everything that had just happened, it didn't even register with Espinosa that his lieutenant had spoken in Spanish, a sure sign the usually unflappable killer was rattled.

"How?" And then, before Reyes could answer, Espinosa smacked his fist against the desk. "The científicos!"

He saw it now. They and their native friends had killed two men earlier, and now three more? They must be planning on

rescuing the lady and the boy.

Well, let them come. They'll have a big surprise waiting.

"Bring me the woman and the boy. Now!"

Reyes departed, his two lackeys trailing him. Espinosa knew without looking that they'd be stationed outside the office door for as long as he remained inside. And lately he'd been spending more and more of his time in his office, even falling asleep in his chair at night. Between the earthquakes, the damages from the local animals, and now his problems with the *científicos*, there was little time for anything else but work.

"Flores. Es una gonorrea de isla." He regretted choosing the island for his new empire. There'd been dozens of others. Considering everything that had happened, it would've been easier to just buy a tiny island and build a landing strip for a plane.

He went to one of the intact windows. Outside, men ran to and fro, getting the plantation back in order as fast as possible. One of them carried two dead monkeys by their tails. He wondered if that was the source of the gunshots he'd heard earlier, rather than the *científicos.*

Monkeys.

Seeing them brought back the images from his dreams.

The office door opened, interrupting his thoughts.

"Inside." Reyes' gruff tones accompanied the entrance of

the lady *científica* and the local boy. They both stumbled as Reyes pushed them forward.

Espinosa smiled as he took in their appearance. Sweat coated their bodies and stained their clothes. Their hair was matted and damp. Both of them had bruises on their arms and faces. But while the boy had the frightened, wide eyes of a young deer, the woman looked as defiant as ever.

He admired that. It wouldn't save her, but he appreciated a strong-willed person when he encountered one. They were becoming too rare these days. Beneath the grime, she was pleasant-looking as well. In another time and place…

But this was here and now. Her only use was as leverage.

He went back to his desk and opened one of the drawers. Inside were the captives' phones and their other personal items that had been taken from them.

"Here." He threw Vahle's phone at her. "Call your friends. Tell them they have a choice. Turn themselves over for execution or I send you back to them without your head."

Vahle's eyes went wide and her anger disappeared. *Good. She should be afraid.*

"I… I don't understand. Why would…?"

"I have three more men dead. That cannot go unpunished. I gave you the chance to leave unharmed. That is off the table now."

"No, that's impossible." She shook her head.

"Lao Ho'a," the boy whispered. Vahle gasped.

"Oh, my god. Were their skulls crushed?"

"How did you know that?" Reyes poked her in the back with his pistol.

"We told you before. There are people in the jungle, a primitive tribe that—"

"Shut your mouth, carechimba." Reyes poked her harder this time, right in the kidney. Vahle yelped and clutched at her side.

"Wait." Espinosa held up his hand. The monkey-people in his vision, they'd had clubs. And it had seemed like their faces were angry. "These things. You believe they are real?"

"I know they are," Vahle said. "We have two of their bodies. Bodies your men left by our camp along with dead animals."

Espinosa glanced at Reyes. "Is this true?"

The other man shrugged. "I told the men to take cadávers from the pits. There are many kinds of animales in there."

"What are these creatures? What do they want?"

"The locals call them Ebu Gogo, or Lao Ho'a. They have lived on this island since before the Europeans got here."

"Your people killed the Lao Ho'a," the boy said. "Now they are angry."

"Angry? I am the one who's angry!" Espinosa's voice rose to a shout and he didn't care. "I'll kill all of them!"

"No! You can't do that. They're the last of their kind. They must be protected."

"I don't care about any of that. Take the men." Espinosa pointed at Reyes. "If these monkey people exist, find them. Exterminate them."

"No, we have to protect them. They're—"

Espinosa slapped her, hard enough to send her to her knees. The sound echoed through the room like a gunshot.

Then it repeated.

Vahle looked up, her hand pressed against her cheek.

Another report. This time there was no mistaking it. Someone had fired a gun outside.

Two more shots rang out.

Someone screamed. Several people shouted. The *pap-pap-pap-pap* of an automatic rifle sounded.

After that, an eerie silence.

The hairs on the back of Espinosa's neck stood up. A familiar sensation came over him, one he knew well from his days in Colombia.

There was danger outside.

Reyes felt it, too. He made a 'get down' motion with his hand and then went to a window and peered out. Espinosa drew his

own gun and knelt with the desk between him and the windows, where he could also see anyone entering the room.

A body slammed against one of the windows and Reyes swung his pistol around. It was one of the guards. His face was covered in blood. As he slid down the glass, he left a red trail behind him.

"We must leave, now!" Reyes waved at Espinosa, who rose and crossed the room in a crouch behind his lieutenant.

"What about us?" Vahle shouted.

"You can die with your monkey friends!" Espinosa fired two shots behind him as he sprinted for the door and was rewarded with a scream of pain.

Served them right. He'd never had any trouble until she showed up. It was probably her and the other *científicos* who brought the tribe out of the mountains or jungle, wherever they came from. Digging up bones. Probably a sacred burial ground.

As he followed Reyes down the hall to one of the back doors, another thought came to him.

This would be the perfect answer to getting rid of Vahle and her team. His men would kill the monkey people and then round up the *científicos*. Bash their skulls in and leave the bodies with a few of the jungle tribe. When the authorities came, it would look like the *científicos* were attacked and fought back, but not well enough. If the authorities wanted to

speak to him, he'd be happy to oblige. After all, he'd never had any trouble with either of them.

Yes, it was beginning to look like Dr. Vahle's cavemen might be a blessing in disguise.

Now all they had to do was make sure his men killed them all.

And how hard could that be?

"Rudie!" Annika rolled the boy over. From the way he'd screamed and fallen, she knew he had to have been shot.

He groaned and clutched at his arm. Blood stained his shirt and dripped through his fingers. When she moved his hand she breathed a sigh of relief. There was a three-inch-long furrow in the flesh of his bicep but no other damage.

"You're okay," she told him, pressing her hand against his cheek. His moans subsided and the wild panic in his eyes faded. It nearly returned when he saw the blood coating his arm but she hurried to explain. "The bullet cut you but that's all. I don't think you even need stitches."

Shouting voices and more gunfire somewhere in the building urged Annika into motion.

"We have to get out of here before they come back."

"But, but the Lao Ho'a are out there," Rudie said as she

helped him up. He winced when he moved his arm too fast.

"I'd rather take my chances with them than Espinosa. At least they don't have guns. C'mon." She led him toward the shattered window. There was no way she was trying to sneak through the house. Better to get into the forest and then head for Wai Sano. Considering how it towered over the tree tops, they shouldn't have any problems with directions.

Annika picked the shards of glass from the frame and then held Rudie's arm so he could climb over the sill. He was halfway through when a voice spoke from outside.

"Move another inch and I'll put a bullet in your head."

Chapter 23

Arnold Worthington cursed as he stepped off the plane at Komodo Airport. If anything, Flores was hotter and muggier than Jakarta had been. He'd hoped the proximity to the ocean and more open space meant there'd at least be a breeze.

Instead, it felt like entering a steam room.

Next to him, Amar Gupta dropped his bags and gave a sarcastic groan.

"And this is why I don't do field work. Who the hell wants to spend their days digging holes in this weather?"

"We don't have to dig," Worthington replied, while silently agreeing with everything his companion had said. There was a reason he'd chosen early in his career to go into administration rather than research. A nice office, a comfy chair, and most importantly, air conditioning. "Let's go find our ride."

Butin Nasution from the Jakarta National Museum had arranged their transportation from Jakarta to Flores, and then from the city of Labuan Bajo to the town of Tempat Kosong, where they could have lunch before a second car took them on the two-hour ride to Annika's camp.

"I am so sorry this is happening," Nasution had said, over and over. "They have been seen in town recently. I am sure they are fine."

Despite the museum director's assurances, Worthington wasn't nearly as positive, especially after finding out Annika and her team had already encountered problems with the Jakartan military. Plus, there'd been several tremors in the area of Wai Sano.

And now she'd gone incommunicado for nearly three days.

When you added all of that to the insane possibility that a tribe of extinct primates might actually be alive in the forests, he couldn't help thinking things were very bad out there.

Criminal activity in the paleontological world was usually limited to theft or fraud. However, with a discovery on this scale, it wouldn't be surprising if someone was willing to kill to claim it.

Or keep it a secret. There were plenty of naturalist groups who'd have no problem resorting to violence if it meant keeping the world from knowing the truth about *H. floresiensis.*

On the other hand, it was still very possible the last Flores man had died off decades ago. Even that would be an incredible discovery.

"Doctor Worthington?" a voice called out. Worthington looked around and spotted a man in his mid-twenties waving at them. He wore a dark blue golf shirt, brown cargo shorts, and sandals.

"Yes," Worthington said, as the man approached them.

"I am Eddy Wynota," the man said, holding out his hand. A tag on his shirt read ToursbyLocals.com. "I will be taking you to Tempat Kosong. Small place, good food. You'll like."

"We're not on holiday, Eddy. Some friends of ours might be in trouble. We need to get there as fast as possible."

The guide shrugged, his smile never faltering.

"No trouble on Flores. Happy island. You'll see. Friends probably fine. Phones don't always work outside of the cities."

Worthington didn't bother giving him all the details. He introduced Amar Gupta and they followed the guide past the big-name car rental booths and outside to a small parking lot. Wynota indicated a decade-old Nissan Pathfinder covered in mud splatters and dents.

"Don't worry," he said, noticing Amar's expression. "Tires good, engine good. I take people all over the island. We'll get to Tempat Kosong. You'll see."

The guide stowed their luggage in the back while Worthington took the front seat and Gupta the seat behind him. Wynota climbed in and hit the gas so hard the acceleration slammed both passengers back.

They pulled out onto a two-lane highway and Wynota glanced at them, his smile even larger.

"Bumpy road when we leave the city, you'll see. Hang on

tight. Don't fall out, dragons might get you." He used both hands to make a gesture like an alligator mouth opening and closing. Worthington wanted to shout at him to hold on to the wheel. He settled for gripping the grab handle over the door.

True to his word, Wynota and his truck got them to Tempat Kosong in less than two hours. By then, Worthington was sure his kidneys were bruised and his spine permanently damaged. The guide parked at a small outdoor café where to Worthington's surprise several tourists in Hawaiian shirts and dress shorts sat at the bar sipping tall, brightly colored drinks.

The town itself wasn't much different from villages he'd seen while vacation on various islands. Run-down shacks, little more than tin sheds, really, lined the few streets. Locals sold beer or food. There were several shops obviously catering to the tourist trade, based on the cheap paintings and hand-made dolls outside. The delicious smells of baked sweet potatoes, smoked meat, and sugary cookies made from rice flour set Worthington's stomach growling.

"You get something to drink, I find other driver. You'll see." Wynota took off around the back of the building, leaving Worthington and Gupta standing alone.

"I could use a water," Gupta said. "Or a soda."

"That's a good idea." In this kind of environment they'd need to drink more to fend off dehydration. They went to the bar

and to Gupta's delight were able to order to bottles of Pepsi and a plate of cookies. They downed those quickly and were on their second drinks when Wynota reappeared, holding a bottle of Bintang beer.

"Driver is on the way. Take you right to where your people were camping. She knows the place, you'll see."

He waved and got back in his car. Worthington noticed he didn't head back the way they'd come.

"Doctor Worthington." Someone tapped his shoulder. He turned and saw a local woman of about forty standing there. She wore a plain black t-shirt and faded denim shorts. Her brown hair was pulled back in a bun and she had a wide smile that showed bright white against her dark skin.

"My name is Mulyani Prakoso. I will be taking you to the campsite. I know the way well. Kersen and Rudie Sakano are my sepupu. My cousins."

Worthington recognized the names. They were the boys who'd found the bones in the cave. According to Nasutin, the older one was also serving as a guide for Annika's team.

"We really need to hurry," Worthington said, after introducing Gupta. "We haven't heard from our people in several days."

Mulyani nodded, a grave expression replacing her smile as she led them across the unpaved parking lot. "Normally we

wouldn't worry. Many people who camp only come into town once a week for supplies. However, his last time here, Rudie told us about the trouble with Alphonse and his men. Everyone in town is aware. Your people even hired extra guards."

"Alphonse? Who's that?" Gupta asked.

Their guide came to a halt by a battered Jeep.

"An orang jahat." When she saw their confused looks, she added, "A bad man. Very bad. A kriminal. He owns much land near Wai Sano, where he grows the kokain."

Worthington felt the knot in his stomach double in size.

The army. Earthquakes. Possibly dangerous hominins.

And now drug lords?

Things were going from bad to dire very fast. He hesitated, torn between wanting to get to the campsite and getting more information before the possibly blundered into the middle of some international drug cartel's operation.

Better to have all the facts.

"Mulyani, change of plans. I think you need to take us to your police station."

Chapter 24

"I said—oh, hello, luv. Fancy a rescue?"

Annika's scream died in her throat as Blake stepped into view, a pistol in his hand. Jeff Nelson and Matt Grundig appeared right behind him, both of them carrying rifles.

"We were just on our way out," Annika said, trying her best to match his nonchalant attitude. The quaver in her voice ruined her attempt.

"Better hurry. This place is a bloody madhouse." Blake helped Rudie down and then held out his arms to Annika. She saw the twinkle in his eye and almost said no. She didn't want to be rescued by him or anyone. Then another burst of gunfire went off on the other side of the building and she shoved her pride aside.

Blake gave her a quick hug as he set her down, but before she could return it he motioned for them to get moving.

"We were right," Annika said, as Jeff led the way from the building. "They're alive."

"Oh, we know." Matt rubbed the back of his head. "We—"

"Save it for later," Blake interrupted. "We need to reach the jungle before those fucksticks notice you're gone."

"Save it…? What's going on?"

"Zip it, luv. We've gotta be hush-hush from here." Blake

held his finger to his lips and then pointed at the massive fields of cocaine plants.

"Best bet's right through there. Straight line to Wai Sano. Few hundred meters of farm and then about a kilo of jungle before we reach the base. Up for jog?"

Annika looked at Rudie. Blood still dripped down his arm. Blake noticed it and in a deft motion lifted up his Hawaiian shirt and tore off a strip of the once-white t-shirt underneath it. Annika caught a glimpse of a long, diagonal scar across his belly, to the right of his navel. A scar she'd never seen when they were dating.

Then his shirt dropped back down and he was tying the cloth around Rudie's wound.

"There. That oughtta hold until we can clean it up proper. Think you can run, fella?"

Rudie smiled and gave a thumbs up.

"I don't need arms to run."

True to his word, he raced through the field of waist-high bushes and was soon out of sight. The rest of the group went at more of a fast walk, with Matt covering their front and Jeff bringing up the rear. With Wai Sano rising above the trees, they had no trouble moving in the right direction. Annika quickly learned to keep as close to the center of the row as she could to avoid getting scraped by sharp leaves or branches.

Still, by the time they reached the end of the field, her arms looked like she'd lost a fight with an angry cat. The men fared even worse, as they were constantly moving from one side to another to make sure none of the guards were after them or trying to head them off.

"Hold up." Blake signaled for everyone to stop. Annika was about to ask why when she felt it. The ground trembling, ever so slightly. She held her breath, waiting for the quake to grow in strength like the last one. Birds squawked and shot from branches.

The tremor subsided.

"Okay, we can keep going now."

Moments after entering the forest, Annika's view of Wai Sano was obscured by the canopy that melded into a green ceiling overhead. They found Rudie waiting for them at the end of the field and now he kept to their pace. His eyes darted left and right, and with each moment it seemed that he grew more nervous.

After a few minutes of watching him, she casually leaned down and whispered in his ear.

"What's the matter?"

"The hutan," he said, motioning at the trees. "It is wrong today."

"The forest is wrong? How?"

"No animal noises. The birds do not sing."

Annika stopped and looked around. Buzzing and chirping filled the air but as she listened, she realized it was only insect sounds.

"Annika?" Blake looked back at her.

"Rudie thinks something's off. The wildlife has gone quiet. I wonder if it's another tremor coming."

"Bloody hell." Blake drew his gun. "I don't think so."

Matt and Jeff both looked grim as well. The swung their rifles back and forth, eyeing the underbrush as if Espinosa's men were about to burst out at them.

Were they? A new sensation took root inside her, a creepy tingling in her neck and the back of her head. Like they weren't alone, someone was watching them. She tried telling herself Rudie and Blake had her spooked, there was no way anyone could sneak up so silently, but the feeling of unseen eyes kept growing.

"We need to run. Now!" Blake grabbed Annika's arm and broke into the fastest jog the undergrowth would allow. Rudie, Matt, and Jeff did the same without any questions.

They'd only gone a few yards when Annika's brain seemed to explode inside her head. She had just enough time to recognize it as the same pain she'd felt the previous night.

Then, just like in the shed, she blacked out.

Arnold Worthington left Tempat Kosong's police station feeling more frightened than when he entered.

The past hour had confirmed his worst fear: Annika was in deep trouble.

Budi Azis, the police chief, had been simultaneously cooperative and no help at all. A pencil-thin man in his sixties with a round belly that made him look like he'd swallowed a soccer ball, he'd given them all the information they'd asked for, assisted them in finding out more, and then offered to do exactly nothing.

"I cannot help you," he kept saying. "That area is out of my jurisdiction."

It had only taken Worthington ten minutes on Azis' computer to discover that Hector Alphonse, as he was known on the island, was in fact Herve Espinosa, an infamous cartel boss who'd been forced to leave Colombia during a major war between several criminal families. He'd apparently set up shop on Flores to rebuild his cocaine empire. While he rarely came into town, his men, including a known assassin, came through several times a week.

When asked why he hadn't been arrested, Azis had shrugged.

"They have done nothing wrong in town. What can I do? If they are shipping kokain, the Army will catch them at the

airport or the docks. No one has filed any complaints. I have no reason to bother with them."

Worthington's frustration nearly boiled over when the chief refused to send any officers to the camp with them because they had no authority out there.

"That is government parkland. You must speak to the Office of National Parks. The rangers will help you, I am sure."

When Gupta asked where that office was, Azis smiled and told them they would need to go back to Labuan Bajo.

"But that's where we just came from!" Gupta exclaimed.

Azis shrugged and apologized, repeating there was nothing he could do unless 'Mr. Alphonse' committed a crime in his jurisdiction.

"He's an international criminal growing illegal drugs on your island. If you can't do something, call someone who can. Like the army."

"They army is well aware," the chief said, lowering his voice to almost a whisper. "Your people have already had problems with them, yes? Why do you think that is?"

That was when Worthington comprehended the true gravity of the situation. Espinosa had the army in his pocket. Annika's public statements about that officer, Bhakti Sasmi, had exposed him as a criminal but there'd been no mention of his ties to Espinosa.

And now he was missing, too.

Who knew how many others Espinosa was paying off? Not just in the army, but in the government.

And possibly the local police.

Recognizing there was nothing else Azis would do for them, he and Gupta had left.

Now they had two options. Make the long trip back to Labuan Bajo and hope the park rangers would get involved, or finish their trip and hope that Annika and the others were alright and simply experiencing radio problems.

Hope, hope, hope. He wanted action and results, not wishes and maybes.

What would Annika do?

The question popped into his head out of nowhere. And right behind it came the answer.

“Let’s go find Mulyani. We’re heading into the jungle.”

Annika woke to a throbbing pain in her skull and the disjointed images from another dream. The same primitive faces as before, with their large eyes. Only this time the hominins had been crying.

She opened her eyes and for a moment she thought she was still in her fantasy world.

The faces from her dreams still stared at her.

"Don't move, Ann," came Blake's voice from nearby. She froze, her mouth half-open and a scream ready to burst out. She was on her back, and above the faces were the thick trees of Flores' rainforest.

One of the hominins leaned closer. It smelled of sweat and wet fur, almost like old gym socks. Looking into its eyes, she saw more than just the spark of intelligence, they were… soulful. As if the creature brimmed with sadness and regret. They reminded her of the eyes of an old, gray chimpanzee she'd seen once at a zoo, who sat motionless on the ground, just staring at the door that led from its enclosure into the back area hidden from the public.

She'd asked one of the keepers about it.

"His mate died yesterday, and that's the door they took her out through. He hasn't moved from that spot since."

She felt Blake's had touch hers, and she clutched his fingers.

"Are they…" she whispered.

"Yes. Ebu Gogo." At those words, the hominin's gaze shot to Blake and then back to Annika. Something in its expression changed, grew harder, even though its lips didn't move.

It doesn't like that term.

Two of the hominins backed away and she saw they carried stout branches. That brought back the images she'd seen in her

first dream, of the hominins and humans fighting.

Had they attacked Espinosa's plantation, and then followed the escapees into the forest? What were their intentions?

Annika's heart sped up and she had to force herself to remain still. If the Ebu Gogo planned on—

The hominin staring at her stood up and stamped its foot, causing her to twitch. It was a male; the streaks of gray in its fur told her it was probably an elder of its tribe.

And it carried a large wrench.

Her stomach clenched as she realized it had most likely stolen it from their camp.

Perfect to crush a skull with.

Someone moaned, a sound more fearful than pained. Blake's hand tightened on hers.

"Sit tight. They could've killed us before, but they didn't."

Annika bit her lip so she wouldn't shout at him. Before? He was obviously talking about something that happened prior to him arriving at Espinosa's. That explained his and Matt's cryptic statements earlier. They'd already encountered the hominins. And Blake hadn't told her. Why would he—

The elder hominin leaned down again. The ache in her head jumped up several notches.

Everything turned black.

In the darkness, a voice spoke.

“I am the First.”

Chapter 25

In the beginning, there were only the People. The People were happy. They traveled across many lands and waters until they found this place. Here they found in peace and safety. They hunted the animals and ate the plants.

For more suns than they could count, they lived like this. In the forests and in the caves by the endless waters.

Then the visions came to the Elders. Strangers with weapons. They would not be kind to the People.

It took many suns for the visions to come true. So many that Elders came and went and the Firsts stopped believing them when they spoke of the times to come.

Until one day the Tall Ones arrived. They were violent and not to be trusted. Their weapons killed from a distance. So the People fled their homes. The left the land by the waters and went deep into the forests, in caves. But the Tall Ones soon followed, and the People had to run again. They made a new home for the Elders inside the mountain that shakes. They learned to hide from the Tall Ones.

They also learned how to defend themselves.

Now the visions have returned. The Elders are warning of an end to all things. The end of the People. The Tall Ones are too powerful. They are killing everything with their weapons and

their machines that bellow and stink. Now they have discovered the People again. The mountain is angry. If the People do not stop the Tall Ones, the mountain will.

I am the First. It is my duty to end the time of the Tall Ones.

Annika had no idea if she was asleep, unconscious, or in some sort of in-between state. The words kept appearing in her head, soundless yet she heard them clearly. Not in any language she knew, but she could understand them. And the images! It was like viewing a dozen movies at once. Timelines entwined, but somehow she followed them.

Mixed in with the story of the hominins were other events, other—thoughts? Words?

She and her team working in the caves.

The dead bodies they'd planned to ship home.

Blake and all the others motionless on the ground, surrounded by more of the hominins.

People with guns—Espinosa's men—shooting.

Terrible pain, in her limbs and her chest. And a different kind of agony, the deaths of loved ones. Of friends. Of family.

All at the hands of men.

And behind it all, like some cosmic backdrop, an all-consuming red haze that ate the world.

This is what the Elders warn of. The end of all.

The other timelines disappeared, leaving only the crimson glow and several faces, all hominins, all much older than the one who called himself the First.

The Elders speak to me about you. But their words confuse me. I do not know if you are the enemy or a chance to save the People.

In the red world, a hominin swung a heavy stick. The sounds of humans screaming followed.

The First appeared, standing before her. In one hand, he held his wrench, which dripped blood. The other was extended out, palm up.

The meaning was clear. Friend or foe. Peace or war.

Dream-Annika took his hand in hers.

"I will help you," she said.

The People do not trust you. I do not trust you. But I believe you speak from a place of truth. I have seen inside you. You defile our places out of ignorance. You are like children. The others are like the Tall Ones from long ago. They want everything they can take and they hurt the People for no reason.

With that, he let go of her hand and the dream world disappeared.

Annika came awake with a gasp.

She opened her eyes and found the First squatting on his haunches, staring at her from just a few feet away. Behind him,

others of his kind had Blake, Matt, and Jeff pinned to the ground, with stone knives held to their throats.

The First stood and pointed at the captives.

—My decision is made.—

Annika's heart stuttered.

The hominins rose and backed away.

Blake rubbed his neck and sat up.

"I don't know what you told him, luv, but I'm glad he listened.

Annika got to her feet looked at the First.

"Tell me what I can do."

The First's eyes grew even more forlorn.

—Help me save the People.—

The crimson returned, only this time there was more detail to the image, one she instantly recognized.

Wai Sano. Only now smoke billowed from the peak and rivers of fire ran down the sides to set the whole jungle ablaze.

"Oh, no," she whispered. Her legs collapsed and she fell back onto the ground.

Blake grabbed her shoulders. "What is it?"

Tears ran down her cheeks and she couldn't stop the sobs that accompanied her words.

"The volcano. It's going to erupt. They're all going to die."

Herve Espinosa stood in the courtyard of the main house and fumed while Reyes and his soldiers set down the last of the dead.

"This is all of them, mi jefe," he said, his head bowed. He had been around long enough to know when to keep his thoughts silent, and this was one of those times. More than one person had lost their head by saying the wrong thing when Espinosa was incensed.

"All of them, yes." Espinosa walked past the row of bodies. "Let me see. That is one, two, three… I count seven of my men and only three of those… things."

He kicked one of the furry monkey-people. Blood from the bullet holes in its chest splattered across the tile.

"Seven. They killed seven of us." He turned and screamed at Reyes. "And you could only kill three of them! You, the great asesino. You have taken hundreds of lives. Your soldados have guns, have training. And you bring me only three?"

Espinosa spun on his heels and stormed back into the house. In his office, he poured himself a glass of rum and downed it. Even as the dark liquor burned its way down his throat, he was already pouring another.

How could those lowly creatures take out armed soldiers? He

could understand one, perhaps two, being surprised. Their skulls crushed as the animals snuck up on them. The others, though. Their throats had been sawed open. That took time.

According to Reyes, the ones they'd killed had been running right for the front door of the hacienda.

He didn't need his lieutenant's guess as to why.

They were looking for me.

He'd been the only one inside at the time, locked in his safe room watching the security cameras. There'd been little to see; the men firing into the *cocaína* bushes. Glimpses of dark shapes darting between the rows.

Then another of those headaches and he'd passed out again. When he woke, Reyes was calling for him to tell him the creatures were gone.

And so were the lady *científica* and the native boy.

They were not among the dead like Espinosa had expected. It seemed they'd escaped.

That had been the match to ignite Espinosa's fury. Finding out a bunch of walking monkeys had wiped out a third of his guards had been gas on the fire.

"Jefe," came Reyes' voice from behind him. "Let me make this right."

Make it right? *Que jodida broma.* A fucking joke. There was only one way to make it right. Those things had entered his

land, attacked his men. Come after him! And Doctor Annika Vahle? He'd thought she was as much a target of their wrath as he was, but now he saw that she'd played him for a *tonto grande*, a big fool. She and the creatures were working together! After all, wasn't she a specialist in primitive people?

He slammed his glass down and turned around.

"Yes, you will make it right, and I will make sure you do. We are going to hunt those animals down and kill every one of them. And the científicos as well. And if you fail, I will be right there to put a bullet in your head. Comprendes?"

"Si, jefe. I will gather all the men."

Reyes hurried off, shouting orders into his radio.

Espinosa went to his desk and got out a pistol that matched the one already in the holster on his waist. Both of them had belonged to his father, before he was assassinated by a rival family.

Now they would either end his problems on this *maldito* island or create an opening for a new lieutenant.

Perhaps both, he thought, heading for the door.

He loved Ernesto Reyes like a brother.

But sometimes even family outlived its usefulness.

"This is very bad."

Very bad? Arnold Worthington wanted to grab Mulyani Prakoso and shake her until her teeth rattled. Very bad didn't come close to describing the situation.

They stood in the center of the clearing where the camp should've been. There were signs of recent occupation: a few scraps of paper, holes where tent pegs had been driven into the ground, and plenty of footprints.

That, by itself, was extremely alarming. But when you added in that they'd come across two vehicles a mile back, one with a pair of dead people in the back and the other with Annika's field satchel on the front seat?

That transcended alarming and went right into terrifying.

He was moments away from panicking and he knew it, yet there was nothing he could do to stop it. People were dead, his entire expedition team was missing…

"Wai Sano."

"What?" Worthington turned to find the guide staring toward the west, where a fog-shrouded peak rose above the trees.

"Your friends. They are not in town. They are not here. Where else would they go?" She pointed at mountain.

"Why would—?" Gupta stopped halfway through his sentence and his eyes went wide. Worthington caught on at the same time.

"Wai Sano. That's where your cousins found the bones."

"Yes. It has many caves. It would be a perfect place to

hide if the kriminals were looking for them."

Hope sprang to life in Worthington's chest, easing the pressure of the dread just a bit.

"Can you take us there?" Gupta asked.

"Of course. But the ride will be very hard. No road, just jejak."

"I don't care. Just get us there."

Ten minutes later, he regretted his words, although he'd say them again if placed in the same situation. Mulyani's *jejak* was little more than tire ruts through the brush. They couldn't go more than ten miles an hour and even then every root, dip, and rock threatened to not only toss them from the car but wreck the tires or axles.

It was less than a mile to the base of the volcano but it felt like a thousand. When they reached a point where they couldn't drive any farther, Mulyani had led them the last hundred yards or so on foot, following a path only she could see.

They emerged from the forest and Worthington got his first real look at the volcano. Sparse trees and gray and black rock peeked through gaps in the mist. From what he could tell, the way up did not look easy at all, especially for a sixty-two-year-old career administrator.

"We have to hike up there?" Gupta asked, echoing

Worthington's apprehension.

"The cave is about halfway—"

"Crikey!" a male voice called out. "What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

At the same time, a second voice shouted, "Mulyani!"

"Rudie!"

Figures emerged from the trees less than thirty yards away. As soon as Worthington saw Annika's face, and several men right next to her, the pressure in his chest eased considerably.

They were alive!

It appeared as if they'd had a tough time of it—all five were covered in sweat and dirt and looked like they'd gone three rounds with a bear—but they were alive.

Then he noticed three of the men carried guns and the young boy running toward Mulyani had bloody rags wrapped around his upper arm.

"Jesus, Arnold, is that really you?" Annika came up and wrapped her arms around him. She stunk to hell, like she hadn't bathed in weeks.

"Good lord, Annika. We've been worried sick. We tried calling, and—"

"Our radio got wrecked—"

"—the police said there's a drug lord who—"

"-he kidnapped me but I escaped—"

"-the dates on those samples, they're—"

"—they're real, Arnold. Flores man is fucking still alive."

Annika grabbed his arm and turned him around. She stared at the forest and called out, "It's safe. He's one of us."

Chapter 26

"Allá arriba." Reyes pointed at the steep, rocky slope. "They are up there." He'd led the way through the jungle, tracking the *cientificos* from the plantation to the foot of the *maldito* volcano. Twice they'd had to stop when the ground shook, spilling water and fruits from the trees onto them.

Before the guards could move forward, Espinosa grabbed his lieutenant's arm.

"How do you know?" It was one thing to follow a path of broken branches and footprints in the mud. But up the side of an angry volcano? Had he been the one running away, he'd have made for town, not put himself in an even more precarious position.

"The caves are up there. I believe they think they can hide in them. Plus there is this." The assassin knelt and touched his fingers to the ground. Espinosa leaned down.

Splatters of red painted the rocks.

"One of them is injured. Their blood will lead us right to them."

"And what if they are waiting to ambush us?"

Reyes smiled and snapped his fingers.

"Tres hombres," he said, pointing up what appeared to be a rough trail. "Shoot anyone you see."

"Or anything," Espinosa added, remembering the monkey-people who'd killed his men with such ease.

"Si." Three men hurried up the path, rifles at the ready. Reyes ordered two more to climb up to the left of the path and two to the right. He turned to Espinosa. "We will wait and then follow. For your seguridad."

"Yes, of course." Espinosa nodded his agreement. But a voice in his head couldn't help ask a question.

My safety, Ernesto, or yours?

For the first time since he'd found Reyes on the streets, he found himself wondering if the assassin's fearlessness had finally reached its limit.

Annika looked around the cave, her thoughts racing in a dozen different directions at once.

Most of her team sat off to one side, packed close together. Roy and Shari were holding hands. No one was speaking and their expressions ranged from nervous to terrified. The three People—she had to make an effort not to think of them as Ebu Gogo or Lao Ho'a, since those terms seemed to anger them—who stood near them had lowered their makeshift clubs but hadn't put them down. Two more of the People stood at the entrance to the cave, armed with pointed sticks.

In another part of the cave, Arnold Worthington and Amar Gupta were huddled over the remains of the murdered People. The First and several of his tribemates had disappeared into the depths of the cave system shortly after leading Annika, Blake, and the others through the jungle and back up Wai Sano.

I must confer with the Elders, he'd mind-whispered to her before leaving.

Blake approached her, and she saw how the eyes of all the People watched him until they were sure he wasn't going to try anything.

Not that anyone on the team would consider it. They'd all experienced ample proof of just how powerful the People's telepathy actually was. They apparently had the ability to briefly render a person unconscious, or close to it, long enough for ne of them to sneak up and dispatch them with a blow to the head.

Or a stone blade across the throat.

Blake, Matt, and Jeff had filled her in on what had happened in the cave while she'd been held captive by Espinosa. The sudden blinding agony in their skulls. Waking up to find the People with weapons at the ready, including the missing wrenches and hammer from camp. Blake said he'd felt the First inside his thoughts, "like fingers in my brain." Then the First had spoken to him He'd apparently seen how Blake intended to rescue Annika

and Rudie.

—You go to war against the bad Tall Ones.—

Without waiting for an answer, he'd then said, *—We will help. I must know more about this Annika before I decide your fate.—*

"The Elders." The way Blake said it, she understood where his thoughts were. Somewhere back in those tunnels was another cave, one that held the bodies of all the previous Firsts. In some impossible way, the living First was able to communicate with his predecessors. Who in turn were apparently able to not only communicate back, but see into the future as well.

She still couldn't comprehend the magnitude of what they'd stumbled into. It was like a science fiction novel. Over and over, she kept trying to push the fantastical elements aside and focus on the immediate concerns.

Like how to survive.

They had a drug lord and his soldiers after them and, if the First was to be believed—she had no doubt he and the Elders were correct—a volcano that might be only days, or even hours, from erupting. There'd already been two more tremors, one while they hiked through the jungle and a smaller one while they'd been waiting for the First to return.

A mountain angry because of what has happened to its People.

More science fiction.

Focus on the here and now, Annika.

Blake crouched down next to her, and in the process his shirt rode up again, exposing the scar on his belly.

Here and now.

The perfect distraction from her thoughts.

"That scar." She reached out and touched it before he could pull his shirt down. "You didn't have it… before. What happened?"

She knew all his others. The little ones from working in the bush or from his various extreme sports. The semi-circle on his calf where a three-foot shark had nipped him as a teenager while he was surfing.

Blake sat and stared off into the distance. For a moment she didn't think he'd answer. When he finally spoke, it was with more sadness than she'd ever heard in his voice.

"After our last African trip together, when I went back to Australia, I really intended to call you. To figure out how we could see each other again. Make a long-distance relationship work. My feelings… they were real. Strewth, cross my heart."

Annika sat up straighter. This was going somewhere she hadn't expected and opening old wounds at the worst possible time. She started to say he should stop but he held up his hand.

"You asked. It's time you knew. Might be my last chance to

ever tell you.

"I was only home a day when I got the news about Michael. You didn't, don't, know about him. He's my son."

Son? Annika inhaled sharply. He'd never told her—

"I never told you. I would've, eventually, but things were still so new between us, ya know? Happened back when I was a frosh in university. Not a one night stand, but nothing serious, either. Two stupid kids, right? After she found out, she wanted nothing to do with me, dropped out. We kept in touch now and again. I tried to do what I could. Sent money. Presents. Visited when she'd let me. Then, out of the blue, she calls. Says Michael's really ill. Liver failure, from hepatitis. She wanted money.

"I did better." He touched the right side of his belly.

"You gave him a piece of your liver." Annika had no trouble believing it. Sacrificing himself like that, it was so Blake.

"Right-o. I was a perfect match. And it worked. He's a healthy lad, good grades, smart boy. I was out of commish for a bit, longer than I expected, 'cause I got a pretty bad infection after the surgery. I was just getting back on my feet a few weeks later when my da took ill. Cancer. For me it was out of the bed and back to work, only not with old bones. I had to take over the ranch."

Annika knew that Blake's family owned a large ranch just

outside of Port Adelaide. They'd been in the cattle business for generations. In fact, Blake's interest in anthropology had been sparked when he'd discovered some aboriginal artifacts on their land.

Assuming control of the ranch's operations would be a huge undertaking, especially for someone who hadn't worked there in years.

"That's awful, I'm so sorry, Blake. But it doesn't explain—"

"He died a week later," Blake continued. "Car accident. On the way to the treatment center. My ma was driving. I lost them both."

Annika wanted to say something but she had no words. Both his parents gone, and him still recovering from his own health issues? How did he even stay sane, let alone keep functioning?

"I… I didn't know. I would've…" That was all she could get out. Hot tears ran down her cheeks. She reached out to touch his hand but he pulled away.

"By the time it was over and I could think straight, it'd been close on four months since we'd spoken. There'd been times I wanted to call, to email, to text. But if I did, I knew I'd have to explain what was going on, the broken loo my life had turned into."

"But I'd have come. I'd have helped you through it."

"I know." Now he took her hands, gripped them tight. Looked straight into her eyes. "That's why I didn't do it. I couldn't be the reason you fucked up your life just 'cause mine was all buggered. I kept telling myself things'll get better soon, and then I can call. But they didn't. Kept getting worse, right? By the time I was right in the head again and told myself what an arse I'd been, it was too late. I called, but you didn't call back. I emailed, you didn't answer. I figured I'd blown my chance, just one more person in my life I'd lost. So I stopped trying. Threw myself back into my work."

He stopped. The rest was history, as they said. He'd become a rising star in Australia-Oceania anthropology, his career following a similar trajectory to her own, but with more time in the field and less time in the classroom.

We always were two ends of the same candle.

On the heels of that was another thought.

If I hadn't been so damned selfish and stubborn, I'd have called him more often, maybe called the university, or… something. Tried harder.

All those wasted years, because he was too proud to tell her the truth and she was too proud to move beyond her hurt.

What a pair we are.

She looked at him, prepared to tell him how sorry she was for being such a fool.

Instead, she laughed.

Right in his face.

Even as it happened, she was cringing on the inside, wishing she could stop, knowing she was hurting him even more. His eyes went wide, but before he could pull away she threw her arms around him, hugged him close. Buried her face against his sweaty, stinking neck.

"I'm sorry, I'm laughing because we're two freaking idiots! Two stupid peas in a pod. Christ, Blake, I've never stopped loving you. If I could do it all over again, I'd—"

He pushed her away. Now he was smiling, too. And crying at the same time.

"Same here, luv. It's only ever been you. Couple 'o real wankers, that's us, right?" He kissed her, his breath as odiferous as his body, and she didn't care. "To the moon and back, eh?"

It was what they'd always replied when the other said "I love you."

"To the moon and back," she said. There was so much more she wanted to add.

But Blake's body stiffened and he let out a moan.

At the same time, a fist gripped her skull and the now-familiar darkness returned.

—The Elders have shown me what to do.—

Chapter 27

Annika's heart stuttered at the words inside her head.

What to do? With us? Did that mean—?

—You will come with me. The Elders will speak with you.—

Her vision cleared and the cave came into focus around her. The First stood before her, the two other members of his tribe that he'd gone off with a few steps behind him. Next to her, Blake moaned and rubbed his forehead.

"Bloody telepathy leaves a lot to be desired as a form of communication."

—Come. The red time approaches quickly.—

His voice was quieter. Unlike before, she didn't black out. Only a brief throbbing in her head. Like he'd turned down the power.

Good thing, or something might rupture inside my head if he kept talking to me at full volume.

The Elders. She glanced at Blake, who was already on his feet and holding a hand out to help her up. She was sure he'd gotten the same message; his eyes were alight with excitement.

*I am going to speak with the leaders of an ancient race, beings—*no, people*—who'd died centuries ago. Maybe even longer than that.*

The magnitude of the situation was almost incomprehensible.

Her thoughts raced so quickly she barely paid attention as they followed the First to the back of the cave and into one of the tunnels. Someone called her name and she heard Blake respond, but none of the words registered.

Then they were swallowed by the darkness. She almost stopped, afraid of walking into a wall or low ceiling. A light came on behind her. Blake, of course. Always prepared. He came up beside her with his phone in hand, the flashlight app turned on and aimed to illuminate the legs of the First and the ground.

As they walked, Annika's training took over. She found herself fascinated by the gait of the First and the other People. Unlike a chimpanzee walking on two legs, where the hips and knees were bent sharply, resulting in a sort of waddle, the Flores People walked in a very high-stepping fashion, with the knees bent farther back than a modern human's. This matched what anatomical anthropologists had deduced from the fossils, which showed feet that were larger and flatter in relation to the body than *H. sapiens*. At the same time, the arms swung in a different motion than modern *Homo*, an almost shrugging motion, due to their heavier bone structure and the morphology of the shoulder girdle.

However, unlike what anthropologists had hypothesized, the People were able to walk just as fast as modern humans, and their arms were capable of equivalent range of motion.

Different musculature, different ligament and tendon attachments and length. That, combined with their thick bones, all added up to a combination of strength and agility.

She felt in her pocket for her phone so she could record her thoughts, perhaps even get some video evidence.

It wasn't there.

That's when she remembered Reyes' men had taken it from her when she'd been kidnapped. *Damn them!* She was losing the opportunity of a lifetime. She nudged Blake.

"Video," she whispered. She was hesitated to say more, lest it aggravate their—what? Captors? Allies? The situation was so tenuous she was afraid to do anything to break their fragile truce. She and her team had already witnessed—and experienced—the Peoples' proficiency at violence.

Thankfully, Blake caught on instantly. He tapped his screen a couple of times and raised the phone slightly so the light illuminated the full figures of the First and the two People that walked with him.

The ten-minute walk took them through two more tunnels, the second of which she and Blake had to bend down in order to keep from hitting their heads on the stone ceiling.

At the end of that one lay another cavern, almost as massive as the one where they'd made camp.

Only this one was a necropolis.

Annika couldn't hold in her gasp of wonder as Blake's light played across the nearest wall, revealing dozens of skeletons laying on individual niches carved into the walls.

Her shock intensified a thousandfold when a picture appeared in her head, accompanied by the now-familiar throbbing.

Row after row after row of Elders, down both walls. Stretching back for… hundreds of years? Thousands? She couldn't be certain, since she was seeing it through other eyes.

"There must be hundreds of them," she whispered.

"You'd be fair right," said Blake, equally awed.

—The Elders will speak to you.—

Annika turned and found the First staring at her.

"All right. How—?"

Hammers and knives attacked her brain without warning. Colored lights surrounded her and it felt as if she were falling down an endless well, spinning and tumbling until she was sure she was going to puke. Voices roared from all directions, the words jumbled to the point of being unintelligible.

"Stop!" She didn't know if she shouted aloud or in her mind. It was too much. She had to—

The world came to a halt. At the same time, the pain lessened to a heavy thudding, like standing next to the drummer during a rock concert. With the sensation of motion gone, her nausea eased.

The voices coalesced into a chorus, hundreds of individuals speaking in unison from a world of darkness.

—Outsiders. Who talks for you?—

"I… I do," Annika answered, still not sure if she was speaking verbally or mentally. "My name is—"

—Annika Vahle. You are the stealer of the dead.—

"No!" Annika shook her head. "We are scientists. We study the past to learn from it."

—You steal the bones of the People from their final beds. You plan to take them far away, to the land of the Tall Ones.—

"Yes, but they will be safe. In a museum, a place where—"

—You will defile them.—

Images appeared around Annika. Bones of various kinds. Packed in plaster. In boxes. On tables, faceless people looking at them. In laboratories, with micro saws cutting thin slices for microscopic examination. With drills and needles piercing them to remove samples for DNA testing.

On display in museum cases.

As she watched, the pictures changed. She was in the cave of the Elders again, only now it was filled with people. People who photographed the Elders in their resting places.

And then removed the skeletons.

One by one, the Elders disappeared. Faster and faster. And with each body that vanished, the voices in her head lessened,

grew dimmer, until only one body remained and one voice spoke.

—This is your legacy.—

The body disappeared, leaving only darkness and silence.

No, Annika thought. I won't let that happen. We will create rules. Laws. The People will be—

A new picture appeared. The First and his tribe.

Dead.

They lay on the ground, their bodies emaciated.

The First opened his eyes, but there was nothing behind the lids. Just empty space. She saw that his ears were gone as well.

Blackness.

Her body shook. Traveling again.

No.

Hands. Someone touching her.

She sat up. Blake knelt in front of her, his face tight with worry.

"Annika? You alright?"

"My fault," she said, unable to deny the truth. "They'll all die. Without the Elders, they're as good as deaf and blind. No counsel, no one to lead them."

"Not your fault, luv," Blake said, helping her to her feet. She tried to argue but he put a finger on her lips. "Our fault. You. Me. The whole bloody team."

"No." She wished his words made her feel better, but they

didn't. "It's my team. My responsibility. I'm in charge."

She turned to speak to the First, saw that he and his tribe mates were already heading back the way they'd come. She hurried over and stepped in front of him.

"There must be something we can do. Something to keep your people safe. It's not just us. The, the bad men, the—"

—The Tall Ones.—

"Yes. Even if we leave, they will not go away. And they will hunt you. Or expose your secret."

—Even now they come. The Elders have shown what will happen.—

An explosion of red rocked her and for a moment the nausea returned. When she could see again, she understood more, but not enough. Not nearly enough.

—That is the way of the Elders. As parents must teach children, so they teach us. They also know that the future is not certain. Each branch of time leads to others, like the spiny fruit tree.—

Riddles. Lessons. She didn't have time to figure them out. There was one thing she knew for certain, though.

"The volcano," she told Blake, as they followed the hominins back to the main cave. "It's going to erupt. Soon. And the People will die. We have to stop it."

"Stop a bloody volcano from blowing?" Blake shook his head.

"I think you're givin' us a might too much credit."

"No. We find a way to save the People. Then we can worry about how to keep the cave of the Elders safe.

Blake's mouth tightened into a thin line and although they weren't telepaths like the People she could practically hear his thoughts.

It's too late for them. The volcano will destroy this place, and there's nowhere else on the island for them to go. Either they'll die in the forests or they'll be discovered and their culture destroyed.

White light exploded around them as they emerged into the main cavern.

The eruption! her brain screamed but even as it did, she understood she was wrong.

It was Devon Mackenzie, standing their with his camera.

The flash went off two more times, leaving her as blind as she'd been in her dream or vision or whatever mystical journey the First had taken her on.

Somewhere in the colored afterimage of the flash she heard Blake shout at the photographer to "put that bloody thing away before they kill us!"

—It matters not.— the First said. *—None of this will remain.—*

"Let him." Annika waved a hand in Blake's direction. "It's

all going to be destroyed. Might as well have something for the archives."

"What is this place?" Mackenzie asked as he snapped more photos.

"The final resting place of their elders." Annika gave him a quick explanation, well aware they didn't have much time. "I promised to keep their secret, but now it doesn't matter. The volcano will blow, the People will die just as they've been foretold, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it."

A strange look crossed Mackenzie's face and he lowered his camera.

"Maybe not a thing you can do about it." He turned to Blake. "But maybe you can."

"Me?"

"You own the family bizzy, don'tcha?" When Blake nodded, Mackenzie continued. "From what I hear, it came with a sizeable inheritance and it's worth heaps."

"How do you know so much about me?" Blake asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Research. I've got loads of info on all of you. Part of my job. And I'm right, ain't I?"

"Yeah, what of it?" Blake acknowledged.

"I've spent a good amount of time in Asia, including Indonesia. One thing I've learned is everything's for sale if

the price is right. And there's a lot of tiny, uninhabited islands all around this area, if you get my drift."

Annika didn't, but Blake's face lit up.

"Bloody hell. You're a genius!"

"What?" Annika asked.

"We buy them an island! Make it private, so no one but us can go there. Tuck the little buggers away for a few decades while we work on something more permanent."

"Buy an island?" Annika knew Blake's family was rich, but that kind of money?

He nodded. "Between what my pops left me, and if I sold some of the land, I reckon I could do it."

"I could even pitch in and help arrange things through my contacts," Mackenzie said. That put Annika on guard.

"And what's in it for you?"

He gave a chuckle. "Me? Just what I want the most. Fame, luv. If I can't have you, I'm more than happy to settle for riding your coattails all the way to a Pulitzer prize. I want you to exclusively use my photos for all press releases, books you write, articles, all of it. Along with your own, of course."

"What makes you think I'll be writing anything? The whole point of this is to keep the existence of the People a secret."

Now Mackenzie laughed good and hard. Annika was ready to punch him. How could he be so arrogant and stupid? Why would

they go through all this just to reveal the tribe to the world?

"Don't you two plonkers get it? Now you can protect those folks and get all the glory. All you have to do is say they're dead. Gone when the volcano blew. Who's gonna know?"

Excitement burst to life inside Annika's chest.

Mackenzie was an egotistic jerk, but he was right. It would be so simple. Reveal to the world the existence of Flores Man as a living species. They had bones, they had pieces of the corpses, they had photos. Tell the story of encountering them.

And then tweak the truth. The entire tribe perished when the volcano blew.

She could put herself into the anthropology history books, create a whole new chapter on human evolution, and in the meantime the People would be safe and hidden on their own island.

Annika glanced at the First. Despite her longing to make it happen, the decision was his, not hers. She started to explain but his thoughts broke in.

—I cannot see clearly. I must know more.—

Before she could move, he grabbed her hand.

And her world went dark.

Chapter 28

Thousands of images and thoughts filled the First's mind. The Annika's head was a place of confusion. How did the Tall Ones survive with so many things happening in their heads at once?

Much of it did not make sense. But some of what he saw he understood. She and her kind believed they and the People were related. That long, long ago they had gone in different directions, taken different paths.

Evolved was her word for it.

The Tall Ones had traveled across many lands, lands that lay beyond the horizon, even beyond the other islands from which the first Tall Ones had come, the ones who drove the People into the forest. There were so many of them! More than the First could count even if he spent his whole life trying. And they took different forms. Tall, short, dark, light.

He saw why the Annika and her people had come. She had told him the truth about that, the same truth he'd seen in the thoughts of the Blake and the others, the Jeff and the Roy.

To learn about the People. To prove to other Tall Ones that the People were real. To put the bones of the People in dark, cold places called museums so that many other Tall Ones could come look at them.

When the First saw this, he almost killed the Annika. It would be easy to do while he still touched her. The minds of the Tall Ones had no defenses. He could end her thoughts, stop her heart, the same way that he was near to a Tall One he could stop them from moving for a few heartbeats. He might need help, but Killer of Lizards and the others were still nearby. Listening to everything he heard, he thought.

All he would have to do is ask.

Then he saw something else.

The Annika understood that if she told all the Tall Ones about the People, too many of them would come to see for themselves. They would steal more bones, take the Elders from their resting places, even take the People themselves. Put them in tiny caves with strange tree limbs to stop them from leaving. The Annika didn’t want this to happen. She wanted to protect them.

She had decided she would not bring back the bones. Not tell her kind what she had found.

But then the Blake and the one named Mackenzie had a better plan. One that surely was impossible, yet the Annika believed they could do it.

Take all the People to another island.

The idea both frightened and excited the First. If the Annika could do that, the People would be saved. But there were

also the words of the Elders to consider. One of the tales they told was that of the Journey. Long before the Tall Ones even existed, the People had traveled long distances from a very large place, which the Elders called the Beginning Land. They left because other Peoples, bigger and stronger, made it too dangerous to stay. Along the way, they encountered many different places and even lived on some of them for long periods before the waters rose up and created the islands. The People, who once numbered many, had become trapped on the now-island.

Now the Annika wanted them to travel across the waters, something they had not done since before the time of the first Elder.

The First thought hard. The People from long ago made their journey to find a new home. A safe home.

Perhaps it was time to do it again.

The First was surprised to discover that the Tall Ones were not different in all ways from the People. The Annika was struggling to make decisions just like the First. Decisions that would affect not just her and her followers, but all the Tall Ones and all the People.

Just like I must do.

We are alike as much as we are different.

In the end, it was that which made him stay on the path he'd chosen. Help the Annika.

He reached out to the Elders for their counsel. They said nothing, which he took as a sign of approval.

A good omen. The first one since the coming of the bad Tall Ones.

Which meant it was time to start their journey.

He released the Annika's hand and spoke to her.

Light and sound returned to Annika and she opened her eyes with a gasp. Everyone still stood in the same positions around her and she realized she'd only been in that other place for seconds. Maybe not even that long.

What had the First done? What had he seen while—?

—I now know what you wish to do. Would the People truly be safe?—

"Yes." She spoke while still struggling to get her mental bearings again. "No Tall Ones except us would be allowed on the island."

—Then let it be so. We will die here if we stay.—

Yes! For the first time in days, Annika felt hopeful again. Everything would work out and—

Gunfire sounded from somewhere down the mountain.

—The bad Tall Ones are here—

Chapter 29

The People turned as one and ran from the cave.

"What in blazes is happening?" Devon Mackenzie looked from Annika to Blake and back.

"Espinosa and his men. They're here." Annika felt for the pistol Blake had given her. Somehow it was still in her pocket, the one thing the drug lord's men had missed when they took her phone. She pulled it out, fully aware of how futile it would be against paid killers who were armed to the teeth.

Blake drew his gun and shouted for Anton and Jeff to grab the two rifles. Rudie's cousins were already exiting the cave with their weapons.

"Stay here," Blake said, holding up a hand to Annika. "You'll get yourself killed out there."

"Fuck that." She slid past him and ran for the entrance. Cursing, he followed right behind her.

The ground rumbled and lurched just as Annika hit the first slope. She managed to keep her feet under her by grabbing a nearby scrub tree. Thorns pierced her palm and fingers and she yelped, but the moment the shaking stopped she continued down the path, already several yards behind Blake.

More gunfire boomed. She paused, trying to figure out which direction. Rain and mist made it hard to see more than a dozen

yards ahead. A dark shape darted past her. One of the People, club held high. It disappeared into the fog. A sharp cry of pain followed a second later.

Annika moved forward, but more slowly. Despite the murkiness she felt exposed. She expected a bullet to strike her at any moment, or one of Espinosa's men to grab her. She wished she could take cover but there were no large rocks and the trees were all far too small.

Dammit. Where's Blake? Maybe I should've stayed in the cave and—

A figure appeared in front of her. She fumbled her gun up but a mental hammer struck her and her arm froze.

—Come with me.—

The First held out its hand. Control of her body returned and she took it. He led her down the slope, sure-footed as a mountain goat despite, or maybe because of, his bare feet.

The sounds of fighting reached her. Grunting, flesh striking flesh, moaning. They passed the prone bodies of two men in green uniforms, their skulls crushed. Whispers filled her head and she realized she was hearing the thoughts of other People through the First, that he was communicating with his tribe, they were all communicating with each other.

—Danger!—

The word hit louder and harder than the others. The First

yanked her to one side at the same time a shot rang out and something struck the rocks right next to them. The First pulled her down into a gully. Her knees banged against the rock and she had to bite her own forearm to keep from crying out.

—Do not move. Bad ones come.—

The rattle of feet on loose stone alerted her to someone approaching from their left, climbing uphill. Vague shapes coalesced into two men making their way stealthily up the path. Green uniforms and pistols identified them as cartel guards. Very slowly, the First rose up, a fist-sized rock in one hand. In his other was the wrench. He looked at Annika.

—Where is your weapon?—

She raised the gun and a picture appeared in her mind. The two men, dead on the ground.

The meaning was clear.

Kill someone? I can't—

The First threw his stone. It hit one of the men right above his ear. He dropped his gun and fell to his knees, both hands holding his head. The other guard turned and aimed his pistol right at the First and froze.

Annika finger tightened on the trigger.

There was a *pop!* and the man yelped and grabbed his leg. Faster than Annika could follow, the First leaped from the gully and swung the wrench at the man's head. She heard the familiar

crack of bone breaking and the second man toppled over.

The First raised his hand again and brought the wrench down on the man's forehead.

The skull caved in with a sickening crunch. The First leaped over the body to where the other man was doubled over and moaning and repeated the killing blow.

The moans stopped.

The First stood up, fist still clenched around the wrench. Blood dripped down his arm and matted the hair. Fury burned in his eyes. He kicked one of the guards' pistols to the side.

—Your kind always brings death.—

Annika shook her head. "That's not true. We—"

"Well, isn't this perfecto?"

Herve Espinosa and Ernesto Reyes emerged from the mist. Both of them held pistols at the ready.

Espinosa's formerly immaculate suit was stain with dirt and green sap. His hat was gone and his hair was plastered down and dripping from the rain. Reyes was in no better shape. Yet both of them still exuded violence and fury.

"Ernesto, matarlos." Espinosa sneered as he gave the order to kill.

"Mi placer." Reyes pointed his gun at the First.

"No!" Annika moved without thinking, throwing herself at the First.

The boom of his gun was much louder than her own. It filled the air, drowning out all other sounds. A heavy blow hit her shoulder and then she was rolling across the jagged rocks. Her head struck something hard and her vision disintegrated into bright fireworks against a black background.

"Annika!" The shout came from far, far away. It was familiar but she couldn't place it. She heard her name again, more distant this time. Everything was fading. Sounds. Pain. The whole world. She didn't care. She'd failed. Failed the university. Failed the People. Failed herself and Blake—

Blake!

That was the voice.

Gunshots roared in the darkness. Someone screamed, someone else cursed.

Blake. They're going to kill him.

Her own life no longer mattered. Because of her, the First and all the People were as good as dead. Her team was probably dead.

Annika opened her eyes.

Herve Espinosa knelt on the ground, holding his shoulder. Blood seeped between his fingers. Reyes stood next to him, his pistol aimed at Blake. A red stain covered the side of Blake's shirt. On the ground next to him, Jeff Nelson lay motionless.

"Adios, cientifico bastardo."

Annika got to her knees. There was no chance of standing and covering the distance between her and Reyes before he shot Blake. The best she could hope for was maybe to distract him so that he missed and Blake could—

Her hand touched metal.

A gun! One of the pistols from the men the First had killed.

She picked it up and fired without aiming. The gun kicked in her hands, harder than she'd expected. Reyes turned her way, his smile growing wider.

"Bueno. You want to be first, perra."

Annika pulled the trigger again.

Both guns fired at the same time. Something whined past her ear. She screamed and dropped the gun.

Reyes stumbled back, a red spot growing near his shoulder. Despite the wound, his arms were steady as he aimed at Annika.

"Adios."

A brown form leaped onto him.

His shout was cut off as the First smashed a rock into his face. Reyes went down and the First stayed with him, pounding his face and head with the stone until nothing remained but a red and gray pulp.

Annika's stomach clenched and she turned away just in time to vomit onto the rocks. Her legs went limp but strong hands

caught her before she could fall.

Gunfire exploded again and Blake pushed her to the ground, fell on top of her. Then his weight was gone as he rolled, snatched up the gun she'd dropped, and fired. The shots were deafening from only a couple of feet away.

Someone yelled in pain.

"Shit. Only winged him."

Blake helped her sit up.

"You alright, luv?" Blake's voice acted like an anchor, grounding her to the here and now before vertigo could claim her.

"I… think I was shot." She remembered the guns going off, and the pain that followed. But all she felt at the moment was cold. And wet. Rain? Sweating? Nothing made sense.

"Sit still, let me check you."

Hands held her steady. Shapes moved around her. Who? Someone touching her. What were they—?

She couldn't hold back the dizziness any longer. The world tilted and then spun, mist and rocks melting into a uniform gray that spread until it was all she could see.

And then even that was gone.

Chapter 30

The First didn't know what to do. Confusion held him in place as firmly as the roots of a tree. The other bad Tall One, the one he hadn't killed, was running away. Escaping into the forest. But the one called Annika was injured.

She saved me. She was willing to give up her life for me. For the People.

He'd seen it in her mind when her body struck his. A flying stone from the Tall One's weapon had struck his arm like a spear and taken a piece away. Blood dripped through his hair, but the hurt was not so bad that it would prevent him from fighting.

—What should we do?—

That was Killer of Lizards, who waited down the hill with Black Bird and some of the others. Their voices joined his. He understood what they wanted.

It would be easy to kill the rest of the Tall Ones, the Annika's people. Only a few had weapons. They were not hunters like the bad ones. Despite the Annika's beliefs, it was still very dangerous to trust the lives of the People to Tall Ones. He had seen in her mind that many Tall Ones were not good like the Annika. If all of them were to die here on the mountain, perhaps no others would come to harm the People and take them away.

-We should kill these Tall Ones. Then follow the one who

had escaped and kill him.—

Killer of Lizard's words made sense. Do that, and there would be no more Tall Ones.

Until more came.

More always came. He didn't need the words of the Elders to know that. They would come to find their people. To dig the bones. To grow the berries that took away sleep. And they would put an end to the People.

That was one path. Down another was a different choice. Leave these Tall Ones be, go after the bad man. And then what? The Annika and her people would leave, take the bones of the People back to wherever they came from. And then more Tall Ones would come, would dig their holes. Find the Elders.

That would also be the end of the People.

There was a third path as well. Do nothing. Because soon the world of the People would end anyway. He could feel it in the way the land trembled. How the air smelled. The vision of the Elders had been correct. At the end of the path lay nothing but red fire.

—Father?—

His eldest daughter, Grower of Flowers. She and the other women waited deeper in the forest, along with the children.

Decide, you must decide.

But how? All paths lead to death.

Except for the Annika's plan. The one that might save them. If he trusted her.

—When the path splits, always take the higher way.—

For a moment he thought the Elders were speaking to him, then he remembered it for what it was. Something his father, the last First, had said to him. At the time, he had thought little of it. Take the higher way. It made sense. To get back home, no matter where you were in the trees, if you went up you would always find you way back to home. The caves.

Now, though, he wondered if his father had meant something else. A meaning within a meaning. So typical of an Elder.

The higher way.

Not taller, but… better?

There was his father's lesson.

Always take the better way.

He thought about what he had seen inside the Annika's head. No evil there. She was worried about the People. And sad that she had put them in danger.

—Trust yourself.—

That was something the Elders had said on many of his visits to them, when he wasn't sure what decision to make.

But hadn't they always said never to trust the Tall Ones? If he put his trust in the Annika, what then?

She was willing to give her life for yours.

Had she been one of the People and in trouble, he knew what his decision would be.

Could he do any less for her than she had for him?

—We will stay and help the Annika and her people. And in return, they will help us.—

There were gasps from the People.

—This is foolish. You do not think clearly. Was your head injured as well as your arm?—

More gasps, this time at Black Bird's disrespect.

—Consider your words.— The First spoke sharply. —I will allow it this time, in the heat of battle. But I am the First. You will do what I say. These ones are not the enemy. We must help them to safety and then put an end to the Tall Ones who—

—Put an end to all Tall Ones, I say!— Although Black Bird was hidden by trees and mist, the First still saw him raise his spear.

—But you only speak for yourself, not the People.—

—Ask them. We will see what they think.—

The First was about to object, but he stopped himself. Even in times such as these, the will of the People must be made known if asked.

—Very well. Who feels as Black Bird does?—

There were murmurs, and the First feared he might have misjudged the Peoples' faith in him. But then they spoke, and

they were unanimous their trust of the First.

—You are all mistaken. I will not stand by while you lead us to our deaths.—

The First had an image of Black Bird disappearing into the trees and then… nothing.

Hiding his thoughts!

The First felt the dismay and shock of the People at Black Bird's violation of one of their most sacred rules. Black Bird had cut himself off from the People. Chosen aloneness.

In the past, those who had done this never returned. The People were not meant to live alone. They required the companionship of lovers, friends, and family. To be part of the whole.

—Brother, do not do this. Come back to us.—

The First knew there was little chance of Black Bird hearing him. But he had to try. The People would expect no less from their First.

—What is done is done— he told them. —Now we must do what is right.—

The People would help the Annika and those that followed her.

Then they would kill the leader of the Tall Ones.

He prayed Black Bird would not interfere.

But first, he must see to the Annika. If she was too badly

hurt to travel, that would change everything. He could speak to the other one again, her mate. But that one's thoughts were not as clear. He was not sure if he trusted the one called Blake, even if Annika did.

Hopefully he would not need to change his decision.

He went to the Annika and placed a hand on her arm.

Herve Espinosa ran through the jungle. Branches and leaves slapped his face and body. One hand was pressed against his side where a bullet had grazed him. The wound on his shoulder burned like acid. Between the dim light and the rain that had started to fall, he couldn't tell how badly he was bleeding, but he'd been shot before and neither of these felt as bad. He could make it back to his *hacienda* and bandage himself. Hopefully some of his *gentes* were still there. He would need them to defend the plantation against those… *criaturas*.

Short and hairy, like monkeys. Or the *enanos* his *abuela* used to tell stories about when he was a young boy. The little people of the forest who protected the trees and rivers.

Demonios, that's what they were. And the *cientificos* had somehow made allies out of them. That woman, Annika. He'd seen her speaking to one of them. It hadn't answered, but it seemed to understand her.

And it had killed Reyes. Smashed his skull.

Saved her.

That had been enough for him. He was outgunned and the jungle demons moved faster than any person. Herve Espinosa was many things, but *stupido* was not one of them. He knew when to fight and when to run and live to fight another day. That was how he'd survived and escaped Colombia, and he wasn't about to die at the hands of some monkey-creatures.

And if the *hacienda* was empty when he got there? That was alright, too. He'd take one of the trucks, go into town, and hire new people. Buy more guns. Flamethrowers. Grenades. No monkeys or scientists were going to drive him off his land.

All he had to do was get there before they did.

—Wake. You are not hurt.—

"What?" Annika looked around, saw only darkness. Was she alive? Dead?

—You must wake.—

That voice. It was the First. Talking in her head again.

—The Tall One's weapon did not hurt you.—

Not shot? But she was sure—

—You sacrificed yourself for this one. You are not like the other Tall Ones. The People will help you.—

Other voices joined his, murmuring, indistinct. Others of his tribe? Then she heard Blake talking. To her or the team? She wished she could shut them all out. It was too confusing. She wanted to concentrate on the First.

"I told you that before." Was she speaking aloud or in her head? She couldn't tell.

—Your words gave us promises. But the People have been tricked by the Tall Ones before. In the times before our time. The Tall Ones promised peace. But their words were false. We had to be sure. To see that you are not the same. —

"I'm not lying. We will help."

Someone shook her arm. Trying to wake her? She wanted them to stop. She needed to stay here, to convince the First.

"What are you talking about?" Blake again. "Hold still, will ya? I can't tie this—"

More shaking. A sharp pain.

—It is too late!— The First's words were painted with fear. *—The time of ending comes.—*

The blackness disappeared, replaced by an endless red. The image changed, drew back. Now it was Wai Sano she saw, lava spewing from the top and flowing down the sides. Forest succumbed to the rivers of lava, set aflame for miles. Animals screeched and wailed.

And the People died in the caves.

—It is the end of the final path. The Elders have foretold it for longer than you or I have lived.—

"No. There has to be another way."

—There is nothing you—

The First's voice cut off abruptly.

"Wait! Tell me!"

"Jesus, she's not right in the head. I think she has a concussion besides that cut. We need to get her—"

Annika opened her eyes. Found Blake and Roy staring down at her. Blake was tying a bandage around her upper arm.

"I'm okay," she said, pushing Blake away. The shuddering continued. If it wasn't him, who was it? "Quit with the shaking."

"It ain't me, luv. It's the mountain. We need to leave, right now. I'll carry you. The bullet only grazed you. Got lucky, you did. That was crazy."

The mountain?

More vibrations. This time she realized it was the ground. Rocks rattled and tumbled down the hill. She looked around.

All of her team was there, standing in small groups. The First was there as well. Frightened eyes looked up toward the top of Wai Sano. She followed their gaze.

A thick, black plume of smoke was rising into the sky.

The end of the final path. The words of the First echoed in

her head.

Wai Sano was about to erupt.

Chapter 31

Now. The volcano was going to erupt right now!

Annika's entire being went cold.

This was it. Everything she'd worked for would be gone. Not just the discoveries they'd made on Flores, discoveries that would change the most basic tenets of anthropology, rock the field to its core, but her entire life. Any chance she might've had with Blake. Of growing old.

The lives of all the people she'd brought with her. Young lives, lives with entire futures ahead of them.

Hopes. Dreams. Knowledge.

An entire race of people.

Incinerated in an instant.

Just like the First had been saying. He'd known all along.

—Yes. The Elders foretold this. Their words—

Their words. An idea rose from the ashes of her despair. One of those 'aha!' moments that she'd read about but never experienced. Because of something the First had told her about the Elders.

The future is not certain.

Maybe it didn't have to be the end of everything after all.

She pointed at the First.

"Gather all the People at the bottom of the mountain," she

said. “Now!”

She turned to Blake. “We only have one chance. The cocaine plantation.”

“What? Ann, this mountain’s about to blow. Those huts won’t protect us a damn bit.”

“No, but they have trucks. We can take them, drive to safety. And they’ll have radios so we can warn the town.”

“We’ve got trucks right down there.” Blake pointed toward the base of the mountain. Why—”

He broke off and looked at the First.

“Hot damn, you told them our idea.”

She nodded. “They helped us. Now it’s our turn to help them. They’re faster than us through the jungle. They can meet us there. We’ll take our trucks.”

A smile crossed his face and he nodded.

“What are we waiting for?”

Another tremor shook the ground. Before it ended, he was up and shouting orders for the team to grab whatever they could carry and say *hooroo* to the rest. Annika looked at the First.

“The place of the bad men. You must take your people there right now. From there we can get them to safety. But you have to hurry.” She tried picturing the idea for him, Espinosa’s trucks driving away from Wai Sano with the People in them.

The First blinked once and then ran down the hill, the

members of his tribe falling in line behind him. In moments, they were gone.

"Ready, luv? I don't fancy waiting another second."

Annika nodded, and then looked back. Their supplies and equipment were still in the cave, along with most of the bones they'd uncovered.

Would their plan work? She could still stick to her original idea. Pretend they'd never found anything. The People would be safe. Science would be none the wiser, at least not for a couple of centuries. Someday the remains of the First would be discovered, long after the species was extinct. Some other anthropologist would shatter all the notions of the *Homo* family tree.

But not her.

No fame. No glory. Instead of seeing her name alongside the greats—Leakey, Johanson, Mead, White—she would instead be merely a footnote, the woman who'd almost lost her team to a volcano.

There would be no anthropological revelations, no discoveries to announce. Everything would be annihilated by rivers of lava and tons of rock.

And maybe that was as it should be. The remains of the People would be buried together, forever a part of the mountain they had called home for centuries. And the tribe would be safe, their existence unknown to all the unscrupulous scientists and

publicity seekers who would be perfectly willing to bring about the extinction of a species in return for a speck of immortality in some scientific journal.

But would they remain a secret?

Their was the rest of the team to consider. After all, their names would be in all those articles and books. In a way, she was ruining their chances for advancement in their fields, setting their careers back.

All it would take to ruin everything would be for one of them to spill the beans.

You're not God. You can't decide for everyone.

Yes, you are. That was her old mentor, Bruce Latimer, speaking up. He'd said something once in one of his lectures.

"When you're out in the field running a dig, you are basically God. Your decisions can mean life or death for your team. Always think carefully and do the smart thing. The right thing."

The right thing.

For the People. For her team. For everyone.

Yes.

"Christ, Annika! Move it!"

As if to reinforce Blake's command, the ground gave a tremendous heave, throwing her to her hands and knees.

I'm sorry. The words for the Elders.

A chorus of voices whispered a single word in her head.

—Run—

Annika got up and ran.

The almost constant shuddering made getting down the trail the most hazardous hike Annika had ever undertaken. Rocks tumbled past. Trees shook. Every vibration, every tremor threatened to throw her to the ground. Ahead of her, the rest of the team struggled to stay on their feet, several of them holding each other for support.

Even Blake, normally as sure-footed as a mountain goat, stumbled and rocked sideways. Of course, he also had two overloaded packs strapped across his shoulders.

Incredibly, Devin Mackenize still had his camera in his hands, alternating between filming the team's descent and turning back to get clips of the smoke rising from Wai Sano. Annika looked over her shoulder more than once, growing more and more afraid they wouldn't make it to the bottom before the mountain exploded, let alone make it to Espinosa's plantation.

The smoke was thicker and darker, and the acrid stink of it, like fireworks and hot coal, burned her lungs.

She almost fell again when the ground leveled out. The rest of the team was already heading down the trail into the forest but Blake had paused to wait for her. He didn't say anything but something in his eyes told her she needed to run faster, so she

did. They covered the mile from Wai Sano's base to Arnold Worthington's battered old truck in record time.

The whole team gathered around it and Annika understood the problem before she even came to a stop. Mulyani was already behind the wheel, but the rest of them didn't know who should get in.

"Arnold," she gasped, pointing at Worthington. "You, Amar, Bernie, and Stephen. Go with Mulyani. Get the other trucks. The old… campsite."

She had to stop and catch her breath. Blake finished for her. "Get the bloody trucks and come back for us. We'll be heading towards you."

Another tremor, accompanied by a deep rumbling that hadn't happened before, an almost subsonic bass note that lingered for several moments.

"The precursors are getting closer together." Bernadette said, as she climbed into the truck. "There isn't much time before it erupts."

Mulyani threw the SUV into gear and took off down the trail.

"You heard the lady," Blake shouted over the cries of jungle birds. "Double time!"

The stench of sulfur followed them into the trees. The sky darkened as more and more smoke poured from the top of the

mountain. Annika knew that lava and ash would come next. She wondered what kind of eruption it would be. Volcanoes were unpredictable. Anything could happen when the pressure of the steam and magma under the ground grew too great. Cracks in the sides of the mountain where molten rock poured out. The entire thing exploding. She knew that in the past there'd been eruptions so tremendous that ash traveled halfway around the world and entire weather patterns changed. Wai Sano wasn't that large of a volcano compared to Mount Tambora or Krakatau, but if the eruption was large enough the results could still be catastrophic not just for Flores but for all the Indonesian islands.

Thunder boomed and the trees rattled around them. Annika risked a look back and saw plumes of ash spewing from the top of Wai Sano. The distance was too far to see if lava droplets or red-hot rocks—what the geologists called pyroclastic bombs—were present. She hoped not; a powerful eruption could send them as far as several miles.

Visions of being bombarded by fiery death missiles spurred her to try and run faster.

It seemed like they ran forever yet it was only minutes later when three trucks barreled around a curve in the path and skidded to a stop.

"Everyone in!" Blake shouted, his face red and his sweaty

hair plastered across it. Somewhere along the way he'd lost his bush hat. People squeezed into the vehicles, shoulder-to-shoulder, packs on laps. As she climbed into one next to Gupta, she noticed that Blake and Mackenzie both made sure to get into the back of the truck that had held the dead bodies of Espinosa's men. She wondered what Worthington—or more likely, Mulyani—had done with them. Then they were rocketing forward into the jungle, Mulyani's road-worn Jeep in the lead, and she found she didn't give a damn. They deserved what they'd gotten.

All that mattered now was surviving.

Branches slapped windshields, doors, and arms with equal violence as the trucks crashed through the jungle. Half the time Annika couldn't even see a path but she trusted Mulyani's sense of direction. The constant kidney-bruising bouncing got so bad it was impossible to tell how much of it was from the rough terrain and how much from the now-continuous quakes from the volcano.

The day grew darker. Gaps in the canopy revealed a sky increasingly covered by thick clouds of black smoke.

An especially loud reverberation shook the ground so hard the truck slewed sideways and bounced off some trees. Behind the wheel, Matt Grundig cursed and fought to keep them moving forward before the Jeep behind them hit their back end. Annika held on to the seat in front of her so tight her hands cramped

but she didn't let go.

The forest ended without warning, the trees and brush replaced by six-foot-tall cocaine plants. Rows of them extended as far as she could see. Mulyani cut sharply to the left and the other vehicles followed. Thunder crashed again, so loud it left Annika's ears ringing. Next to her, Danny Chen gasped and she looked back.

There were now flashes of red mixed in with the black smoke billowing out of Wai Sano. Spears of lightning flashed around the top of the volcano. Ash began to fall around them like black snow as they raced for the safety of the *hacienda*. The constant rumbling and detonations from the volcano drowned out all other sounds and forced everyone to shout.

"There it is!" Matt pointed ahead. Sure enough, the cluster of buildings was still standing. Better yet, there were three large trucks parked in a small courtyard. Annika figured the rusty, dented pickups were used to transport workers to and from the fields.

I hope to god they can get us far enough from here without falling apart first.

By the time Matt brought the SUV to a stop, Blake and Jeff Nelson were already out and running toward the trucks. The ground gave a violent lurch and a loud roar came from Wai Sano. Blake stumbled and fell. Jeff reached the first truck and yanked

open the door. He peered inside and then looked back at Blake.

"Keys! We need—aaah!"

Jeff spun away from the truck, clutching his shoulder. Blood ran between his fingers. His eyes rolled up and he toppled over and lay still.

A figure in a dirty white suit emerged from the hacienda, a pistol in each hand. Two rough-looking men dressed in green uniforms stood with him, armed with rifles.

Herve Espinosa smiled.

"Hola, Doctor Vahle. How good of you to make my job easier."

Chapter 32

Annika stood frozen in place as Espinosa told the rest of the team to get behind her. Blake moved to check on Jeff but Espinosa waggled the gun.

"No, no, leave him be or your pretty jefe will join him. I am more than happy to shoot any of you who try anything."

"What do you want?" It was Devon Mackenzie who spoke. Annika wanted to tell him to shut the hell up and not provoke Espinosa.

"I want you to die. You've caused me much trouble. I was going to kill you all myself, but I will enjoy it more if your island does if for me. You and your monkeys can all burn together while I will just start another plantation on another island. One without volcanoes and intelligente monkeys. Quite fitting, don't you think?"

—We are close to you.—

Annika jerked at the sudden words in her head. The First! If he and the People arrived now, Espinosa might kill some of them before they could subdue him. She tried sending him a message, an image of Espinosa with his guns and where he was standing in relation to the building.

He has weapons, the ones that kill from far away. Don't let him see you.

—We come.—

"What is your problem, Doctor?" Espinosa's eyes narrowed.

"Nuh… nothing." She didn't have to fake sounding frightened. "Please, just take one of the trucks and go."

If that was his intention, there would still be enough vehicles for the rest of them after he left. It would be cramped, but they could do it. At least she hoped so. She realized she had no idea how many of the People there were. Twenty? Thirty? Fifty? What if there were too many? How could she choose who was saved and who got left behind?

"Oh, I will," Espinosa said, his leer returning. But do not think I'll leave any of the others for you." He turned and shot the tire of the closest truck. The *pop!* of the pistol was lost in the continuing thunder of the volcano's imminent eruption.

Annika bit her lip. She had to stop him from putting the other vehicles out of commission. But how?

Keep him talking. We need enough time for the tribe to arrive.

"Wait!" She held up her hands. "The police know about you. They'll be looking for you. There's no place in Indonesia you can hide now. But if you let us go, we'll tell them you helped us. Or that you died. That way you can really start over."

"For a scientifico, you are very stupido. Or you think I am. I have money, and that is all I need to start a new life. A

few bribes in the right places and no one will care what I do."

He waved one of the guns as he spoke, but the other remained pointed steady at her chest. The falling ash had reached near-blizzard conditions, making it hard to see more than a few yards, but Annika wasn't ready to take a chance on Espinosa's aim.

"I can buy my own island if I want. I'll be a king!"

Thunder and lightning crashed and the falling ash grew thicker. He motioned for them to step back from the trucks.

"Time grows short. I hope you enjoy your last few moments together." He aimed at the next truck.

Nothing happened.

Pressure gripped Annika's head.

The People!

—Hurry. We are still too far to from you.—

Blake caught on at the same time. Or maybe he heard the First as well.

"Take him down!"

He rushed forward but just as he drew even with Espinosa the mental grip of the People let up and he pulled the trigger at the same time Blake tackled him. The shot went through the door instead of the tire and then the two of them were rolling on the ground. Annika started forward. The gun went off again and she stopped. Blake landed a punch but Espinosa lashed out

with his other hand, striking Blake in the face with a gun. Espinosa leaped to his feet and grabbed Annika, spun her around. He gripped her in a choke hold so that she was facing Blake and put his pistol to her head.

"No one move! I will—"

Something struck his back and he stumbled forward with a grunt. He let go of Annika as he turned and she darted to the side, certain she knew what was about to happen.

Espinosa ducked as another rock sailed by his head. The two guards fired shots into the cocaine field.

Shapes appeared, three of them. The First and two others, one of them female. All three held spears.

No! Annika thought at him. *He'll kill you.*

—A leader must do what is necessary. The rest of the People are not here yet. With only three of us, we cannot make them all go still.—

Espinosa laughed and pointed the gun at them.

"Monkeys! Bueno, I get to put a few of you down before I leave. I—"

A rock bounced off his head. He cried out and spun around to face the trucks. Annika looked that way as well, but not before she saw the First's eyes go wide.

Surprise? Fear?

Another of the People stood there, holding a second rock,

his arm poised to throw.

"Loco monkey!" Espinosa fired two shots. One hit the tribe member in the stomach and he doubled over. The second carved a red crease across his shoulder as he fell to his knees.

"Ha!" Espinosa turned back toward the First. He raised the gun and Annika knew it was too late for the leader of the People. For all of them. The drug lord didn't need to shoot any of the others. Killing their leader and leaving the rest at the mercy of the volcano would effectively end the existence of their species.

A rock struck Espinosa right on his ass.

"Mierda!" He spun and fired in one motion. The wounded tribesman flew backward, mouth open in a silent scream. He hit hard and lay still.

Espinosa gave a triumphant shout that turned into a gasp as two spears burst through his chest. He looked down and the gun fell from his hand. He turned toward Annika and opened his mouth.

"Jodete y tu monos." Blood sprayed out with the words. "This fucking isla, I—"

His eyes rolled back and he collapsed to the ground.

The First ran past the dead man to his fallen tribesman. Annika caught a snippet of his thoughts as he went by.

—Black Bird. Why did—

The First laid his hands on the still body. A weird, low humming came from him and grew in volume as the other People joined in, the tone eerily similar to the rumbling of the mountain. More and more of them emerged from the cocaine field, chests heaving from their long run. The entire tribe gathered around their fallen companion.

Blake motioned for the group to head for the trucks and then ran over to Annika and grabbed her arm.

"Now or never, luv. C'mon, rattle your dags."

"Right. Yes, let's go." Annika gave herself a mental shake. She was still stunned from the two deaths. Or was it three? She broke free from Blake and hurried to where Roy and Danny were crouched around Jeff.

"He's alive," Roy said, touching his fingers to Jeff's neck. "Looks like it got him in the shoulder."

His next words were lost as Wai Sano emitted a deafening roar.

"Into the trucks!" Blake shouted.

Annika touched the First on the shoulder. *We have to leave now. I'm sorry for your friend.*

The First stood and the humming stopped. With his fur soaked by rain, he looked twenty pounds smaller and, thanks to the soot turning to mud on his body, three shades darker. The rest of the People looked equally worse for wear. Annika counted

twenty-six of them, a mix of men, women, and seven children of various ages.

—We cannot put our brother to rest. But his memories are ours now. We will join you.—

Humans and People climbed into trucks, squeezing in as tightly as possible into back seats of the one SUV and piling into the beds of the pickups. Annika joined the First and some of his People in one. Blake called for Mulyani to "Get a damn wiggle on!" and then they were off, the six trucks thumping and bouncing through the rutted path that led away from Espinosa's plantation.

Trees closed in around them, blocking out Wai Sano and the ominous clouds and lightning surrounding its summit. Flakes of ash found their way through the leaves and branches, but it no longer seemed like they were in a blizzard. The light diminished until it was almost night-dark, and Annika knew it wasn't just from the forest canopy.

As they drove, she caught glimpses of movement and color in the underbrush. She remembered something she'd read, about hordes of animals fleeing forest fires. And how even dogs and cats seemed to know when earthquakes were about to occur.

She wanted to ask Bernie how far they needed to get from the volcano before they were safe but talking was impossible over the combined din of the engine, tires, thunder, and

constant quakes. It was all she could do just hang on for her life as the truck slew its way down the path, striking more than an occasional rock or tree along the way.

The jarring ride tossed the occupants around and banged them into each other. Each time Annika bumped into the First, she caught glimpses of thoughts. Pictures and emotions rather than words. Fear, confusion, and regret wove through images of mummified bodies and the faces of People, some smiling, some solemn. Other images showed the People sitting in circles, or eating plants and fruit, or hunting lizards.

The ride gave Annika time to contemplate what she'd learned about the *floresiensis* species. Their gait, with the hips swinging open slightly, neither human nor ape, but somewhere in-between. Donald Johanson had once postulated they might spend a lot of time in the trees, but she'd seen no evidence of that at all, although she suspected they could climb well for fruits and maybe to escape danger.

And their expressions! Despite their primitive features, they were capable of conveying thoughts and emotions with their faces and eyes, something that no anthropologists had believed possible.

But most of all it was the telepathic capability, something that allowed them to communicate complex ideas—on par with modern humans!—despite having vocal cords that were capable of

only rudimentary speech. The tales Rudie had told mentioned the little people had spoken some words, but so far she'd only heard them grunt or hum.

I could write a dozen, no a hundred, papers on them just from what we've seen. Spend a lifetime studying the bones and musculature.

The First turned sharply and stared at her. Reading her thoughts again. She wondered how much he'd heard.

"Don't worry," she said, knowing he'd hear her even over all the noise. "I will keep my promise. The People will be safe."

How she'd keep it, she still wasn't sure. But she'd find a way. She had to. She owed it to them. She would not be the one that caused an entire race go extinct.

An explosion louder than any of the others drowned out the thunder, the sounds of the trucks, everything. Moments later the ground didn't just shake, it heaved, sending the truck two feet into the air. It came down with a bone-jarring crash and then bounced up again. One of the People flew up in the air and only the quick reflexes of two others saved it as they grabbed its legs and kept it from sailing out of the truck bed.

Something the size and color of an apple landed by Annika's feet with a metallic clang. People and humans pushed away from it and she saw it was a chunk of red-hot rock. More of the

deadly missiles fell around them, some banging off the roofs of the trucks and others hitting the road, where they sizzled and steamed in the mud.

"Pyroclasts!" Bernie shouted, even though no one could hear her. Not that they needed to. Humans and People alike curled into balls and covered their heads with their arms. Something hot burned Annika's leg and she shook away a grape-sized pellet. Then it was raining fire and stone. Most of the lava droplets cooled enough during their flight that they only hurt when they hit but some of the larger ones were still fiery hot, hot enough to raise blisters when they struck flesh.

For the next several minutes Annika alternated between shouting in pain and praying no one would get severely injured. Or killed.

A hot wind blew through the trees with gale force, bringing with it dark smoke that burned the eyes and filled her nose with the stench of sulfur and acrid tang of molten metal. The foul air seared her lungs and caused her—and everyone else—to cough uncontrollably. A new fear awoke, that the fumes of the volcano would kill them before the flying debris. She wanted to bang on the roof and tell Matt to drive faster before they asphyxiated.

A flaming sphere streaked down like a comet and struck the path between them and the truck ahead of them. Fire and mud exploded and Matt swerved hard to the left. The truck slammed

into a tree and Annika's head hit the back window so hard she heard it over the booming of pyroclastic detonations. The truck seemed to spin, or maybe it was the whole world. Her vision faded and dazzling lights flashed in the darkness.

Then everything disappeared, replaced by a dimly lit cavern. Rows of elderly People stood there, facing her. Their faces were wrinkled with age and their gray fur balding in places. But their eyes shined with lucidity.

One by one, they raised their hands, nodded, and dissolved into ash.

An immense sensation of emptiness followed, accompanied by a deep, heart-wrenching grief.

Annika opened her eyes and found herself laying on her back, one of the People cradling her aching head. Next to her, the First held her hand. He was looking behind them, in the direction of Wai Sano.

For once, she didn't need to hear his thoughts to know them. They were obvious in his tear-filled eyes, which had never looked more human. The Elders were gone and they had sent a final message.

Goodbye.

A high-pitched whistling cut through the clamor of their escape and the roar of the volcano destroying itself. At first she thought it came from the People, that they were keening in

sorrow. Until she saw the giant fireball heading toward them from the sky.

At that moment, she knew there was no escaping death. A sense of calm came over her and she closed her eyes. A thought came to her, in Blake's voice. It was no surprise that he was chuckling.

"Always hoped we'd go out with a bang, luv."

Then the world exploded with a deafening boom and she was flying through oven-hot air.

Chapter 33

White.

No shapes. No sounds. No movement.

Just white.

Annika couldn't tell if her eyes were open or closed. If she was awake or dreaming. She felt no sense of movement. Which didn't make sense. She'd been in the truck. There'd been a loud noise. Then nothing.

She blinked. Things came into focus. Not white, just a bright sky, so unfamiliar after days of forest and rain. Tears ran down her cheeks and she turned her head. Blinked again.

She was still in the truck. Lying in the bed, her head propped up by some knapsacks.

A voice behind her said "Thank god!"

Blake.

She tried to move and the rest of her body woke.

Everything hurt. She groaned. Even her throat ached. She felt like someone had used her as a punching bag and bruised her from head to foot.

A shadow fell over her. Blake, leaning in, his face a mix of worry and relief.

"Welcome back to the land of the living. Gave us quite a scare, you did."

"What…?" It was all she could get out before a fit of coughing hit her. Each tightening of her chest was like someone shoving broken glass into her lungs.

"Easy, there, luv. Want a drink? We all sucked in a fair amount of bad air."

She nodded. The pain in her muscles intensified, but when he handed her a bottle of water she forgot all about her possible injuries and drank half of it. The fire in her chest eased immediately.

"You thought you were Supergirl." He explained that a pyroclast had hit right next to the truck and sent them careening into a tree. She'd been thrown out and landed on the path. Luckily, the truck behind them hadn't hit her. They got her back in and Mulyani led them halfway across the island to the town of Badjo, where her brother had a fishing charter business. He'd agreed to loan Mulyani and Rudie a boat to take some scientists on a sightseeing trip around Flores.

"According to a map Mulyani got, there's a little uninhabited island about thirty klicks out in the Flores Sea, about dead on to the middle of Flores if you drew a line. Figured it's as good a place as any to hide the People until we figure out what to do with 'em."

"They're okay?" she asked. He nodded.

"Right as rain. No one's seen hide or hair of 'em. Got them

packed into a couple of trucks in the charter's shed."

He went on to say that Jeff had dropped Matt off at the local hospital, along with Worthington and Gupta, who would handle the authorities' questions.

"Wanted them to bring you, too, you had quite a knock on the noggin. But Mr. Fishman insisted you'd just break out and follow us if we did that."

"Smart boy," she said, her voice raspy but the fire in her throat already easing. "Where's everyone else?"

"Down at the dock, getting the boat ready. As soon as it's nightfall, we'll load the People and head out."

"In the meantime?"

He shrugged. "We bake."

She wanted to ask him about the First and his injuries, but just then Devon Mackenzie came over. Blake stepped away to give him room.

"How's the queen of Anthro doing?" He gave her a grin and lowered his voice. "I've thought a lot about you in the back of a truck, but not like this."

"Not the time for your crap, Devon. Just leave me alone, alright?"

"Everything hunky-dory?" Blake asked. Devon sauntered away.

"Ask your gal," he called over his shoulder.

Blake did, with his eyes.

"Ugh. I don't wanna talk about it." Which was the truth. Her head ached, her body ached, and there were a million problems to worry about. The last thing she wanted to do was admit to Blake that she'd slept with Mackenzie. That was something that could wait until they were back home and alone.

Especially since she had no idea how he'd take it.

"Not like we don't have a lot of time. Hours to go before night. If he's been bothering you, just say the word and I'll give him a good hiding." Blake's voice took on a hard tone and she knew he'd make good on his threat of violence. She couldn't let that happen. Mackenzie was an ass, but it was her fault that the situation had ever happened. She could've said no.

Shit. We're really going to do this. Here. Now.

"There's something I need to tell you. Something happened between Devon and I. It was only once. Early in the trip, way before you and I got back together. I knew it was a mistake and I told him it would neve happen again. I swear, there's nothing between us."

She reached out for his hand but he edged away.

"I get it. No biggie, right? Like you said, we weren't together. I just wish you'd been honest with me from the start."

He walked off. She called out to him but that started her coughing again. By the time she finished, he was gone.

Great job, Ann. Expedition in shambles, still don't know

what you're gonna do with the People, and now you probably ruined your relationship before it had a chance to start.

Over the next few hours, she was able to talk to Roy and the rest of the team, all of whom were overjoyed to see her awake and relatively unharmed. Shari told her that she probably had a mild concussion and some bruised ribs to go along with the bullet wound, which hadn't needed stitches, and that she should stay off her feet for the rest of the day and not do anything strenuous. She also said that she'd cleaned and wrapped the First's bullet wound, which was deeper than hers but since they couldn't take him to a hospital, there wasn't much else she could do. When Jeff returned from town, he updated her on what had happened. Matt was going to spend a couple of days in the hospital with a through-and-through in his upper arm but he'd be fine.

"Dr. Worthington told the police about Espinosa and the cocaine plantation, and that it had been Espinosa who shot Matt. Since they were all killed by the volcano, the police didn't ask many questions. Everything south of Wai Sano is in a state of emergency and all their officers were heading there to help. The one we spoke to said we should talk to the Jakarta police when we get back."

Roy and Jeff helped Annika out of the truck and to a chair on the porch of the charter office, where she could sit in the

shade. She wanted to see the People, and the First, but Roy said the repair shed where they were hidden was at the other end of property and she was supposed to rest.

She tried reaching out to the First with her thoughts, but nothing happened except it made her headache worse, so she stopped.

The day stretched on into afternoon. She drank water and soda. Blake stayed depressingly absent, not visiting her once. Roy helped her make a list of the specimens they'd managed to salvage from camp. That buoyed her spirits a little because it turned out to be more than she'd expected. They had most of the skeleton from the second cave. The head and a leg from one of the decomposed bodies. The two stone blades.

Of course, none of it could be revealed unless Blake was able to buy an island for the People.

And how likely was that? He and Devon had been all gung-ho over the idea, but would it actually be possible? If not, all their efforts would be for naught. Unless she could guarantee the Peoples' permanent safety, she would never make any of it public for fear of someone finding out the truth.

Then what?

We'd have nothing. The reputations of everyone would suffer. Her team would probably hate her; after all, they'd nearly died because of her.

Not to mention a relationship I just flushed down the toilet.

Stop thinking like that! her inner voice said. The important thing was she'd saved the People. Prevented a primitive race from going extinct. Everything else she'd worry about when the time came.

No matter how many times she reminded herself of that, her mood sank lower and lower as the day dragged on.

At four o'clock, Roy and Shari went into town and came back with bags of take-out. Annika opened hers and found a cardboard container filled with what looked like vegetable fried rice topped with two fried eggs. Not what she'd expected, but she was so hungry she'd have eaten anything at that point.

She couldn't help notice that Blake and Devon sat as far as possible from both her and each other. Although she doubted either man had said anything to anyone, there was a palpable tension in the air she couldn't help thinking was due to the strained situation between the three of them.

That made her depression even worse.

As soon as everyone finished eating, they were more than happy to get back to work. Annika tried to help unpack the trucks but Shari told her to relax.

"No physical exertion after a concussion. The more you rest, the better off you'll be."

The sky was darkening to a deep violet when Blake announced that they'd be leaving in an hour.

"Finish up whatever you're doing, hit the loo, and let's be ready to go soon as the last boats come back in for the night."

Annika grabbed her backpack—considerably lighter because Roy had taken out anything heavy—and made her way to the dock, where she stood apart from everyone else, leaning against a piling. Even that short walk tired her out, and she was grateful she'd taken Shari's advice about resting.

At just before nine, the two trucks with the People in them pulled down to the short pier. Roy, Blake, and Rudie got them out and herded them down the wooden dock to the boat. Even in the dark, Annika could see how nervous the People were. It was in their hesitant movements, the way they kept glancing around.

—The Annika?—

The First's mental broadcast hit her like a sledgehammer. Her legs buckled and she had to grab the piling to keep from falling. A groan escaped her and red spots appeared in her vision.

I'm here, she managed to think. *It's okay. You're safe.*

—Not safe. Danger.—

The red spots expanded into the same all-encompassing conflagration he'd shown her before Wai Sano erupted.

It was too much. She whispered no, no. The First seemed to

realize he was hurting her and he stopped thinking at her, but she still sensed his worry.

There are no volcanoes where we're going. And no Tall Ones. His anxiety built up again, she could feel it like someone had thrust head into a pressure chamber.

"Please, stop. I can't—" Someone grabbed her arm and the connection with the First broke. The sudden absence of pain was so intense her entire body went limp. Strong hands caught her before she could fall.

"Doctor Vahle, are you alright?"

A glowing orb appeared in front of her. The moon, but its face was wrong, it was—

Anton Schnell.

"I'm okay," she managed to say, although she knew she wasn't. But her strength was coming back and she was able to stand upright without his help.

"You sure?" He glanced toward the boat like he was about to call for help, which was the last thing she wanted.

"Positive," she said, putting as much strength into her voice as she could. "Let's board."

He gave her a dubious look but nodded. "Okay. But I'll be right next to you."

Annika didn't object. Her first couple of steps were shaky and her whole body was tense, anticipating more contact from the

First. But when nothing happened, her muscles relaxed and she made it the rest of the way without any problems.

As soon as they boarded, Mulyani called for Rudie to cast off the lines and they set off into the blackness. The boat's engines were loud enough that in the back it was hard to make conversation. She didn't want to go upfront where Blake was conversing with Roy and Mulyani, and she didn't want to sit out in plain view where Devon might wander over.

Instead, she squeezed between two large coolers mounted to the deck and prayed the ride wouldn't get too bumpy. She'd never been on a boat anywhere except a lake and had no idea if she'd get sea-sick or not.

It was impossible to tell how fast they were going but it seemed like twenty minutes before the lights of the town faded to tiny dots. Another twenty minutes after that, Rudie gave a yell.

"Island up ahead. Almost there!"

Annika stood and peered around the side of the boat. The island was a darker shape against the starry sky and water. She watched as they approached it. Mulyani shouted something in Bahasa and Rudie scrambled up to the very front of the boat.

There was a bump and then a grinding sound and she realized Mulyani must've driven them right into shallow water, where they'd hit sand.

Rudie jumped down with a splash and waded up to what looked like a tiny beach, no more than twenty or thirty feet long, with a rope that he tied to the nearest tree.

"All ashore that's going ashore," Blake said, coming around the left side of the cabin. Port or starboard? Annika wondered. She'd heard both terms but had no idea which one meant left and which one right.

I'll bet Blake knows. Although he'd never mentioned it specifically, she was sure he knew his way around a boat. He surfed, he fished, he had to have gone out on boats before. Sure enough, he went to the back, opened a hatch she hadn't even seen, and pulled out a small anchor that he tossed over the side. Then he unlocked a ladder and clipped it over the railing.

"Water's only knee-deep," he said, as the team made their way over to him. "Roy, you and Matt go down first and be ready to help the People ashore. Me an' Mr. Webster will assist them with the ladder."

Blake opened the door to the cabin. Immediately, a sense of danger enveloped Annika. Not only the First, but all the People. She tried to tell him again that it was safe, no danger, but his thought-feelings grew even more agitated. She caught glimpses of the People running through the trees, falling down in the water, disappearing. A crimson mist covered everything, like seeing a movie through a red filter.

"No, no, it's okay."

Blake turned and looked at her.

"What is it?"

"They're afraid, afraid of the island. They think it's going to erupt." It hurt to speak. Her head was pounding worse than ever and her vision kept going gray and coming back. Blake looked confused and she understood why. He couldn't hear anything. It didn't make sense, the First had spoken to both of them before.

But only when touching him, came a thought. It was hers, not the First's, but she felt the truth in it. For some reason, maybe because of how often he'd spoken to her, or how deep he'd been in her brain, the First didn't need physical contact with her to communicate.

It doesn't matter. If he keeps thinking at me, my head will explode. She had to do something.

"Maybe if I get out, they'll follow me."

He shrugged. "Worth a try. Not like we can force them."

Annika went to the ladder and Steven helped her down to where Roy and Matt were waiting. She almost slipped on the wet rungs but held on and didn't embarrass herself by falling on her ass. The water was cool but not cold, and it revitalized her enough that she was able to walk to the tiny beach on her own. She heard splashing behind her and turned to find Bernadette,

Danny, and Shari making their way through the gentle surf.

"Blake said we might as well all get off, that it will help prove things are safe," Shari said.

—Not safe! Not!—

"Aaagh!" Annika fell to her knees, holding her head. The First's mental voice cut off, but not before she saw the same red-tinged images as before, the People running through the forest. Someone, she thought maybe Shari, asked a question but the words made no sense.

By the time the pain faded back to a dull ache, the People had given in to the inevitable and left the boat. The water was higher on them because of their shorter height, and having to force themselves against it accentuated their non-*Homo sapiens* gait. In the darkness, they looked like a tribe of oversized chimps emerging from the sea.

The closer they got, the more intense the feeling of doom and menace grew. Annika understood it was the People's, not hers, but the very presence of it was triggering her own emotions and she found herself trembling and just as afraid as she'd been when Wai Sano erupted.

—Danger here. Too late.—

The First's words sent another spike through her brain. She gripped her head again as if that could keep it from exploding. The beach spun around her and the red spots expanded into a

miasma creeping in from all sides.

She felt something warm and wet trickling from her nose. Someone grabbed her by the arms. She lifted her head just in time to see the First and the rest of the People collapse to the sand. Voice shouted. She glimpsed movement in the trees. She tried to point but her arm refused to move.

The movement became shapes. Shapes that emerged from the forest.

People.

Only not her People. One of them looked at her.

And then the fiery vapors consumed her.

Chapter 34

Rage. Fury. Hatred.

Emotions battered Annika like fists. Red eyes stared at her, dozens of them. Bloody claws dug into her brain. Everything was red, red, red—

She opened her eyes and it all disappeared, leaving only a distant sensation of anger and a lingering dull ache in her head.

It was still night, with the sliver of moon and a million stars overhead. Cold sand told her she was sitting on the beach. She looked around, saw the rest of her team in similar positions nearby. Farther away were the People; even in the dim light she spotted the First in front of his tribe.

Standing in small groups around them were the Others.

She was able to tell them apart because their faces were painted with red markings. And they all carried weapons, sharpened sticks or large stones.

Anger emanated from them like fire.

"Don't move," came Blake's soft voice from behind her. "We're in a bit of a pickle here. Put us all to sleep, they did, and we woke up like this."

Annika nodded, hoping he could see the movement. She took the opportunity to study their captors. Identical in size and

appearance to the People, there appeared to be about twenty of them, all adult males.

That means a breeding population. The rest of the tribe has to be somewhere else. The women. The children.

"You realize what they are?" she asked Blake in a whisper.

"Nah yeah. Split off from the main population, either when they arrived in Flores or after the Euros came later on."

"They've been here for hundreds of years. Maybe thousands. Without any deviation in physical appearance." The impact of it gripped Annika like a fist. Not one isolated tribe. Two! Maybe even more. Who knew how many islands the *floresiensis* people had populated before modern man took over? And why had there been no evolutionary changes in all that time? They looked exactly the same.

But there are differences, she thought. The use of decorative paint, for one. She mentioned it to Blake.

"There's something else. These buggers are heaps better at the whole Jedi mind thing. Knocked us all out, they did. Even our new friends."

Telepathy. The People had it to a certain degree. Plus the ability to see into the future, at least some of them. Was that the reason for the First's worries? Had he sensed the Others on the island, tried to warn her? And the fury, the red haze… was that the thoughts of the others impinging on her brain or the

First's attempt to articulate something he hadn't fully glimpsed, equating the red paint with the only danger he knew from Flores, the fiery lava of Wai Sano?

"We have to find out what they want. Communicate with them. Like we did with the First, show them we're not an enemy."

"You're in no shape, Ann."

That was sure true. She was already cringing at the thought of the pain more thought-speak would bring. But she had to.

"The First trusts me. Tried to warn me. Maybe together we can—"

A thousand knives pierced her skull, making speech—and thought—impossible. Blake and the beach disappeared.

She was back in the world of darkness, only this time she wasn't alone. The First and two of the Others were there. She was able to see each of them clearly because colored auras glowed around them. Red for the Others, a pale green for the First. She looked at herself and saw her own was white, with streaks of yellow.

The larger of the two Others, who still would barely hit four feet tall, took a step forward. Like his companion, red markings decorated his face and neck.

—I Sees in Dark.—

The mental voice was rougher than the First's, almost a growl. But far more powerful, enough to make her whimper. The

difference between the two was like listening to a radio at full volume and being in the front row of a heavy metal concert. And the images accompanying the words—or maybe the images were the words, like telepathic cuneiform, she couldn't be sure what was what—were much sharper.

"I am Ann—"

-Know who you are. The Annika. Saw in your mind. Saw in his.— Sees in Dark pointed at the First.

"Then you know we mean no harm. We are—"

—You are Tall Ones!— Sees in Dark shouted. His aura changed from red to dark crimson. *—Bring death to the People!—*

"No! Ask them. We saved the People. From the volcano." She tried to picture the mountain with the lava flowing down, but it was hard when all she wanted to do was curl into a ball and let her head explode, end the pain.

—We are only People.— Sees in Dark thumped his chest. *—All others are intruders. Not allowed.—*

A spear appeared in his hand as if by magic. The Other with him had one as well. The meaning was clear. They were prepared to use violence.

Annika gritted her teeth. The pain was intensifying, the red haze creeping in again. She needed to convince the Others of their peaceable intentions, her team's and the People's, before she passed out. Or had a brain hemorrhage.

"But they are like you. The Tall Ones have made it impossible to live on their island. All we are doing is helping them. We will not stay."

—Not true! Your kind never tells truth. Is why we are here.—

The scene disappeared, replaced by another. Blue-green ocean waters. A beach and the rainforest, with mountains rising up behind them. The People, many of them. A thriving population. She watched as they hunted giant rats and tiny elephants, over-sized birds and monitor-type lizards. Some waded into the water and speared fish. The women gathered fruits and tubers, tended to the young.

It's Flores, Annika realized. *Before the—*

Ships appeared. Ancient galleons with three masts and wide sails. Men came ashore in rowboats and attacked the natives with swords and long rifles. Many of the People were killed. Others fought back with their spears and rocks before escaping into the forest. Some of them went deeper into the island. There they split into two groups, one of them making their way east and back to the coast. Those few, no more than two or three dozen, remembered how their long-ago ancestors had moved from island to island to escape their enemies, by using dead trees to float across the waters. From Flores, they made it to another island. Then they did it again, and again, until they could no longer

sense the thoughts of the Tall Ones.

But, just like the First and his People, the Others were forced to leave behind the Elders who provided counsel. Only in their case, it had been mostly very young—Annika interpreted it as teenagers and children—who survived the crossings. When they finally ended their flight, they were left without leadership, without any of the knowledge held by the Firsts and the Elders. They lost much of the history of the People in the process, knew only what they'd been taught as children.

Images sped by like a movie in fast-motion. The Others built a new society, one based on keeping themselves hidden from the Tall Ones. They became nocturnal. Without the Elders' ability to see the future, they developed their mental powers in a different way. Focusing outward, for defense and warning, and also to help them sense prey in the dark.

This continued for generations, each one stronger telepathically than the last. They were able to sense the Tall Ones on Flores and other islands, keep track of them.

They remained aware of the People on Flores but feared making contact because it might also bring about the attention of the Tall Ones. They believed the People of Flores had made a pact, a truce, with the Tall Ones, which was how they remained alive on an island filled with intruders.

So great were their mental powers that they developed an

ability to project negative feelings as a group and they used it to ward off any ships that approached the island, make the Tall Ones fear coming ashore.

It didn't affect us, though, Annika thought. We were already so frightened and desperate, we didn't notice. The First and the People did, though. Tried to warn me. But I didn't listen.

—Now a decision must be made— came Sees in Dark's voice. *—We do not want others here. Better alone.—*

The image of the Others on their island vanished, replaced by the Others stabbing and bludgeoning the People and Annika's team to death. Carving up their bodies and using them for food.

—You are wrong. These Tall Ones are not like the others— It was the First, speaking up for the first time. The pale glow around him pulsed in time with his words. *—The Annika tells the truth. They saved us from the mountain of fire. They did not reveal us to others. They even fought bad Tall Ones with us.—*

Brief pictures of Espinosa dying, of their escape from Wai Sano, flashed through Annika's mind. She was sure Sees in Dark and his companion were getting a more complex message.

—Not believe. Tall Ones cannot be trusted. Other People lie like them. How else alive? How else not hungry?—

Oh, god. It all became clear for Annika. The Others were starving to death on their tiny island. They'd used up most of

their food sources. A race of hunter-gatherers, they'd slowly been forced to subsist on just fruits and other vegetation.

"Please, listen to me. I can show you we are telling the truth. I just need to speak with my companions."

Sees in Dark remained silent for so long Annika feared he was keeping her trapped in the dream state while his people murdered her team. Finally, he spoke.

—I will let you talk. We will hear all. Expose your lies. Then kill.—

Annika knew better than to argue about the lack of privacy. The darkness evaporated and once again she was on the beach, Blake supporting her so she didn't fall over. Her head throbbed worse than before and blood dripped from her nose. She wiped it away and before Blake could ask if she was alright, she hushed him and started speaking as fast as she could. She didn't bother whispering, knowing the Others would read their thoughts anyhow. Plus, she wanted the rest of her people to understand the predicament they were in.

"The Others. We were right. They came here from Flores generations ago to escape slaughter by the Europeans. They've built a whole different society than the People. But now they're starving to death. Look at them."

She pointed at Sees in Dark and the tribesmen gathered around him. Now that she knew what to look for, the situation

was obvious. They weren't just a slimmer version of the People, they were thin to the point of emaciation.

"Right. So what do we do?"

"They want to kill us. We're not just intruders. We're food."

That brought several gasps from her team, and she quickly hushed them.

"Stop. They're reading our minds. Think positive thoughts. I think we can solve this." She turned to Blake and held out her hand. "I need you to join with me, help me talk to them."

He stared at her, his expression unreadable. Still pissed? Or afraid? She wasn't going to beg. If he wouldn't do it, she'd ask Roy. Or Shari. She needed someone who would—

He took her hand. His was cool and gritty with sand. She looked at the First, held out her other hand. He got up and came ovr. Two of the Others poked him with their spears but didn't block his way.

His warm, callused hand slipped into hers.

She plunged back into the darkness.

Sees in Dark waited there for them, along with his second-in-command, whose name she now saw was Looks Far.

Icy fingers gripped her brain, dug into it, moved through her thoughts and memories like hungry rats burrowing through walls. She tried to stop them but she had no power. Unlike the

comparatively gentle probing and image sharing of the First, this was a mind-rape, a forced entry into her thoughts.

At the same time, she got glimpses into their consciousnesses. Bits and pieces of ideas and memories, some in pictures, some in words. She saw that their names were more than just physical descriptions. Sees in Dark didn't refer to his eyesight, but rather his superior ability to enter into the minds of others. And Looks Far was the best of his tribe at tracking what was happening on far-away Flores.

Like before, she witnessed scenes from the past. The Others adapting to their new home. Hunting the game—tiny elephants, giant rats, deer-like creatures. The same fauna that had inhabited the other Indonesian islands at one time. But unlike Flores and the other inhabited islands, no modern animals. No rabbits, no smaller rats, no pigs. One by one, the ancient creatures disappeared. The Others couldn't even collect mollusks or fish because of their fear of being seen kept them away from the beach except during moonless nights.

Annika shivered at the confirmation that the Others saw them as the biggest source of food they'd come across in a century or more. Through their mental bond, she felt waves of fear and anger from Blake and the First.

Food, she thought at Blake. His aura was golden bronze, like his summer tan, with jagged spikes of orange and yellow.

That's the key. If we can feed them, they might let us live. It was the only chance they had. Without waiting for his confirmation, she turned her attention to Sees in Dark.

"We can help you. With food, with safety." She pictured the rats, the small deer, and the monkeys of Flores. The First chimed in with images of he and his People hunting them.

"There's more," Annika said. "Your people, and the First's people, you would be stronger together. Your children would share your abilities, the mind-talking and the seeing of the future."

"Ann, that's too bloody complex. Keep things simple."

"I know what I'm doing, dammit."

Lightning bolts of red and purple flared between them. Representations of their emotions, just like the red haze of Sees in Dark and Looks Far. She tried to calm herself, but Sees in Dark saw it.

—Look!— he thought to his tribe. *—Even now they show their violence.—*

"No!" Annika shook her head, or at least felt like she did. "We communicate differently than you because we don't speak with our minds, but with our mouths, our faces. Not all Tall Ones are warlike."

She gripped Blake's hand tighter.

"We defend ourselves when we have to." A sharp pain ran

through her as Sees in Dark yanked an image of them fighting Espinosa's men from her memories. "Yes, like that! Bad men. But we came to Flores—the big island—to learn about the history of the People, not hurt them. We are peaceful."

"We don't always agree," added Blake, "But we discuss things and try to do what's right, just like you."

"And sometimes we make mistakes," said Annika. "But hopefully we learn from them." She tried to bring up thoughts of her deciding not to tell the world about the People but instead Sees in Dark grabbed a different memory and stole it from her.

Devon Mackenzie's face.

Blake's aura turned dark blue, but before Annika could apologize Sees in Dark stripped away more layers, exposing all her thoughts and feelings. Guilt, regret, sadness. Fear of losing Blake. And the fact that she still loved him.

To her surprise, Blake burst into laughter. His aura changed again, to a pale yellow.

"Ann, I love you, too. I wasn't gonna leave ya. I was just pissed and needed a good sulk. To the moon and back, right?"

"To the moon and back," she agreed, her heart soaring.

An image of the moon appeared, and both Sees in Dark and Looks Far gasped. For the first time, Looks Far spoke.

—It cannot be!—

Sees in Dark looked at Annika and Blake, his eyes wide.

Fury erupted from him in a crimson supernova. He jumped to his feet, a spear in his hands.

—Lies!—

Before she could move, he thrust the spear into her head. Agony exploded in her brain. She had time for a single scream.

And then she was gone.

Chapter 35

Annika was sure she was dying.

Never before had she felt such pain. It transcended hurt; it was a torment that filled her entire body, as if someone had detonated an acid bomb in her skull and now it was flowing through her veins. Images flashed by too fast for her to follow. From the brief glimpses she got, she knew they were her own memories, that Sees in Dark was tearing through them like a madman ransacking a filing cabinet.

Then the brutal attack paused and a single picture froze in the darkness.

The Moon. Only closer this time, and with a spaceship heading away from it toward the Earth. It took her a moment to recognize it as a scene from a science fiction movie she and Blake had watched while dating. The camera moved in closer and two people were visible through a window, a blonde woman and a dark-haired man standing beside her.

Sees in Dark's anger melted away and the image disappeared. There was a dizzying sense of movement and then she was back in the dream-circle, with Sees in Dark and Looks Far across from her and the First and Blake to either side of her.

—Moon travelers.—

She was transported again. Still on the same beach, but

surrounded by Others. It was night, and all of them were staring up at the Moon. Understanding rushed through her.

They worshipped the Moon.

It made sense. In order to stay hidden, they'd become nocturnal. During the day, when the Tall Ones were the most active, they hid in the forests, with only their guards to keep any invaders away.

Another wave of disorientation and then she was back on the dream-beach.

—We knew the Tall Ones came from far away, but not how far. Does the Sky Mother protect them all?—

Annika started to explain how he was wrong but the First's mental voice overrode her.

—No. The Annika and her people are children of the Sky Mother. See how pale they are? The bad Tall Ones come from other place. They are day children.—

The First projected an image of Espinosa and Reyes. Standing under a blazing white sun with cocaine plants in the background.

—In the time before time, our people traveled far. So did the Annika and her people. Once, you came to this place for safety. So now do we. With the Annika's help. She is a friend of the People. Like Sky Mother, she looks after us.

There was a long silence following the First's words.

Annika started to worry nothing would change Sees in Dark's mind when he and Looks Far disappeared.

The First rocked back in surprise.

—Blocking their thoughts! For our People, this is forbidden. Only the Elders and the First may do so.—

Annika had the impression the First was intimidated by how powerful the Others' psychic abilities were. Not only could they trap people in the dream-place, but they could come and go as they pleased. Before she could think further about it, their captors reappeared.

—We have decided.—

A panicky tremor ran through Annika's dream-body. Blake gripped her hand tighter. On her other side, the First did the same.

—The People can stay. If the Annika can do what she promises and protect us.—

"I can."

Sees in Dark nodded once. His aura had softened to a more pastel shade of red. He and Looks Far disappeared.

There was the now-familiar dizzying sense of movement and she was back on the beach, in her own body. The rest of the group was staring at them. Several of them asked questions but she ignored them. She thanked the First for his help and then turned to Blake.

"We need to figure something out, and fast. I know we can bring some animals over, enough to feed the Others and get a breeding program to start. But other than that…"

To her surprise, Blake smiled.

"I think I have the answer to all our problems."

Chapter 36

From her spot on the back of the fishing boat, Annika watched the tiny beach slowly retreat and felt a mixture of awe and regret.

I can't believe we did it.

On the heels of that came another thought, one she'd been having equally as often the last few days.

I can't believe I own an island.

Since the moment Blake had told her his idea, their lives had been chaos moving at hyper-speed.

She hadn't believed him when he said he wanted to buy the island inhabited by the Others. Sure, they'd talked about it with Devon Mackenzie before, when they were busy saving the People, but she'd never believed it could actually be done. Certainly not one this large. That would take money. A lot of it.

She'd underestimated how rich Blake was.

It had taken some finagling with the Indonesian government, but with the help of Butin Nasution and Devon Mackenzie, and the current international fame of her party thanks to their struggles with Espinosa and surviving Wai Sano's eruption—not to mention the news they'd revealed about a primitive race that lived more recently on Flores Island than anyone had ever

believed—they'd brokered an agreement that allowed Blake to purchase the island.

He'd had to sell half his land in Australia, which he did. And then proceeded to sell half the remainder in order to establish the Pribadi—the name they'd given the island, which meant Private in the local tongue—Research Centre.

He'd also added her name on all the contracts as co-owner.

For as long as they owned it and paid the taxes, which Blake assured her would be covered by the proceeds from his remaining cattle business, no one would ever be able to step foot on Pribadi without their permission.

In return for repopulating the wildlife of the island and eliminating the threat of the Tall Ones, the Others had agreed to let Annika, Blake, and their hand-picked team of scientists excavate any bones they wished. As long as they weren't the bones of People. It turned out there were all sorts of prehistoric remains to be found, including a few species Stephen Webster assured her had never been seen before, and the whole team was already hard at work with Roy and Stephen overseeing their efforts. Devon Mackenzie had stayed on too, photographing one discovery after another.

Blake came up beside her and took her hand.

"We'll be back soon, luv. It's just a few weeks."

"A few weeks of hell." Her phone and email were already

overflowing with requests for interviews. She, Blake, Devon, and Arnold Worthington had worked out what they would disclose to the public and what they wouldn't. The scientific community was already going wild about the existence of a prehistoric race that had lived side by side with modern humans, only to be wiped out by a volcanic eruption.

She and the First had come to an agreement regarding the remains they'd uncovered. The bones would be taken to Chicago, where casts would be made and samples taken for DNA testing. Then they would be placed on display in the Indonesian National Museum in Jakarta. Sees in Dark had assured them that even at that distance. She'd honored the First's wishes for the bodies of the People murdered by Espinosa's men. Those would be buried on Pribadi.

Between the skeletons, her pictures, and the photos and videos taken by Devon, she had more than enough to study for the next ten years. If she could find the time. Her publisher had already offered a multi-book deal, with one of them to be co-written by Blake.

Between research, writing, and interviews, she doubted neither she nor Blake would be getting much sleep for months. They'd both already put in for sabbaticals and he'd accepted Worthington's offer to be a guest professor in residence at Case for the next two years.

It was all more than she could have ever hoped for, career-wise. Yet as she watched the shoreline recede, all she kept thinking was how much she wished she could stay.

"So, what's next?" Blake asked.

"Next?" Resignation filled her voice. "The interview circuit and getting fat sitting at our computers."

He let out a laugh. "You really think so? Me, I'm already looking forward to our next adventure."

"Adventure?" She shook her head. "No thank you! I'm done with drug lords and volcanoes. As boring as it sounds, I'll be happy getting back to the ordinary dangers of Chicago."

"Really? We discovered all sorts of new species and saved some ancient hominins from extinction, all less than twenty klicks from a populated city. There's a whole, big world out there, luv. I don't know about you, but I'm wondering what other legends might be true and just waiting for us to discover."

Annika looked at Pribadi. A tiny island whose forests hid one of the greatest secrets of the world. She thought about Blake's words.

What other legends might be true?

She glanced at him and found him smiling, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. Just like always.

"A little adventure might not be so bad. As long as we're together."

His smile grew wider.

“To the moon and back, eh?”

“To the moon and back,” she said. “Forever.”

He sealed the promise with a kiss.

END