

CHAPTER ONE

Mouth of the Amazon Tributary, *Rio Pandora*— Brazil

Dr. Ian Stewart trudged up a steep bank running alongside the newly completed earthen dam. The pain in his arthritic knees was a constant reminder that his days in Her Majesty's Royal Engineers were long behind him. Back then, he'd been a young officer, building pontoon bridges and disarming mines in the Falklands; now he was a fifty-eight-year-old academic, better suited to lecture halls than mosquito-infested jungles. But he'd retained much of his youthful knowledge, if not its vigor. Under his supervision, a crew of barely literate laborers had erected a thirty-five-yard dam from nothing but downed trees and mud. Even more impressively, he'd done it all in an unmapped rainforest, hundreds of miles from civilization.

Ian stopped to catch his breath, thinking, *Not bad work, for a prisoner*, before continuing the long climb. Passing groups of laborers offered their boss a respectful nod, while AK-47-toting sentries just eyed him suspiciously.

Ian thought, *The workers think I'm the boss, but the guards all know I'm just a prisoner.*

He reached the dam's crest and turned away from the workers, pretending to polish his glasses. In truth, he just didn't want to be seen struggling to catch his breath. The expedition's thirty-eight laborers were all river trash, who spent their off hours engaging in drunken knife fights; not the sort you wanted to show frailty around. After a few seconds, Ian felt his wind and dignity returning enough to supervise the next, critical phase.

The dam's crest offered him a panoramic view of the site. On its upstream side, the now dammed Rio Pandora tributary had swollen into a vast floodplain. The two-hundred-foot cargo barge *Opala* was moored there, its generators powering the work site.

On the dam's downstream side lay a circular lake, roughly two miles in diameter, surrounded by a thirty-foot earthen rim—a textbook example of a meteorite impact crater. The dam had reduced the lake's depth to barely seven feet, exposing the most important scientific discovery since Copernicus. A brilliant full moon shone on the partially submerged object resting in the lake's center—a sixty foot in diameter sphere Ian had christened "The Anomaly."

The Anomaly was, by definition, a meteorite. But in his decades of experience as a planetary geologist, Ian had never seen anything like it—nobody had. It had been buried beneath the lakebed for thousands, perhaps millions of years, until a recent earthquake forced it to the surface. The Anomaly's ancient descent through the earth's atmosphere had left large sections scorched black, but other areas gleamed in the moonlight like a gigantic jewel. That resemblance

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wasn't merely cosmetic; the Anomaly was, for lack of a better term, a gigantic diamond. Ian had analyzed shards of ejecta discovered around the lake and concluded that they all possessed the brilliance and clarity of the finest gemstones. Meteorites often contained flecks of diamond, created by heat and intense pressure, but this defied all logic.

Ian stared down at it, muttering the same question he'd pondered for weeks. "What the hell are you?"

A team of laborers had just finished constructing a sixty-foot-long log causeway connecting the shore and the Anomaly. Its completion marked the beginning of the next phase—drilling into the Anomaly and, hopefully, discovering its secrets.

Ian's thoughts were interrupted by a barrage of Portuguese profanities coming from the other side of the dam. He turned around to investigate, thinking, *Christ, not another knife fight.*

He traced the shouting to the dam's base, where eight bickering laborers were unloading the geotechnical drill rig from a motorboat. One of the men lost his grip on the rig, almost dropping it into the water.

Ian shouted, "Be careful," but couldn't be heard over the *Opala's* generator. He fumbled for the bullhorn slung over his shoulder, his panic rising. The drill's tip was forged graphene, the hardest substance on Earth. It was the only tool, short of a laser, that could cut through diamond. Losing it would bring the entire operation to a screeching halt.

Ian was about to shout into the bullhorn when his foreman, Ursa, slapped him on the back.

Ursa said, "Relax, *chefe*. You got to know how to talk to these *idiotas*." He bellowed a torrent of physical threats at the men below then turned back to Ian. "Don't worry; we'll have that drill up and running quick as hell, *chefe*." With a yellow-toothed grin he added, "Then maybe Mr. Batista will let you and your wife go home, safe and sound," while stretching his arms to ensure Ian saw the .357 strapped to his hip. He ambled down to the drill rig.

Watching him walk away, Ian muttered, "Bastard." Ursa's last comment had been a cutting reminder that Ian was indeed a prisoner, and Ursa was his jailer.

A month earlier, Ian had been invited to speak at a planetary geology symposium in Rio de Janeiro. But the invitation had been a ruse, engineered by a sociopathic mineral dealer named Hector Batista. He'd abducted Ian and his wife. Now Margaret was a hostage on his yacht, hundreds of miles away. Earning her freedom meant ensuring that Batista's expedition was a success. Thankfully, Ian was on the verge of achieving just that.

Under Ursa's abusive supervision the drill rig was mounted onto its tracked platform. It began rumbling up the incline on its six wheels. With its hydraulic drilling arm folded down the rig resembled a miniature Mars Rover. Its geotechnical drill would reveal just how thick the Anomaly's diamond layer was. If it was merely a shell, surrounding a ball of iron ore, it would still yield more quality diamonds than De Beers could mine in a year. Gem quality diamonds, cut from a one-of-a-kind meteorite, would become the ultimate status symbol, earning Batista billions.

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Enough to buy Margaret's freedom, Ian hoped. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. *The greatest scientific discovery in history and Batista is forcing me to chip it into bits to sell off for jewelry. That's why he'd resorted to kidnapping—no legitimate scientist would willingly participate in this atrocity.*

Ursa's voice boomed through a bullhorn. "We're ready down here!"

Ian raised his binoculars, surprised to discover that the drilling crew was already in position, waiting for permission to begin.

Christ, how long have I been standing here brooding?

He switched on his bullhorn, and, after a second of feedback, shouted, "Commence drilling!"

The operator raised the hydraulic arm, pressing its drill tip against the Anomaly's diamond surface. The drill roared to life, clanging like a giant bell. Ian watched anxiously, reminding himself that the operator had been recruited from one of Batista's emerald mines. The man handled a drill like a surgeon wielded a scalpel.

Taking a few calming breaths, Ian gazed up at the stars, contemplating the Anomaly's mysterious origins and its myriad of contradictions. *How could a solid meteorite this size be pushed to the surface? And why is the crater lake so small? The impact of a solid object this size should have created a crater three times larger. But if the Anomaly is hollow that would indicate some intelligent—*

His concentration was shattered by a brilliant flash of lightning shooting across the starry sky. A second, equally intense bolt followed. Black clouds rolled across the night sky, blocking out the full moon.

A bolt of lightning shot down, striking the water near the *Opala*. Ian spun around, his hair tingling from the static electricity. Men scrambled across the *Opala's* deck, checking the electrical connections.

Ian felt the dam rumbling beneath him and muttered, "Another aftershock?" But that made no sense. The earthquake had occurred weeks earlier, meaning any aftershocks should have long subsided. Yet the ground trembled again.

Turning back to the lake he watched the drill operator boring into the Anomaly, blue sparks of static electricity dancing around the drill tip. A blinding flash of light erupted from the Anomaly's surface. The drill and operator were momentarily engulfed in what appeared to be ball lightning. A second later, the electrical discharge vanished, and all that remained of the drill and its operator was a heap of smoldering ashes. The surviving drilling crew scrambled along the causeway toward shore.

Ian stared in amazement, asking himself, "Did the Anomaly just generate power?"

The earth rocked again, throwing Ian to the ground. He heard screams echoing from the floodplain side and turned around.

The *Opala* was rocking violently as if in a storm, yet the water around it was dead calm.

The work lights on the lakeside flickered then died, plunging the area into darkness.

Ian muttered, "Bloody hell," certain the power lines from the generator had been jarred loose.

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He knelt atop the dam, trying to see in the darkness. Another bolt of lightning shot down, striking the water twenty yards from the boat. Then, in one horrifying moment, the two-hundred-foot *Opala* listed sharply to port. Screaming men spilled off the deck. A moment later, the boat capsized, crushing the men in the water.

Ian gaped in disbelief. Nothing had struck the boat, and the water had been perfectly calm. It was as if some giant hand had risen from beneath, tipping it over.

Lightning crackled across the sky, offering fleeting moments of illumination. Ian glimpsed a dark, serpentine shape rippling across the water. Then all went dark, until a series of lightning bolts flashed across the sky in succession, like a giant strobe light.

The shape raised its head from the water, a screaming man dangling from its mouth. The glistening nightmare was at least seventy feet long and thick as a redwood tree, its gray body dotted with brown saddle-shaped markings.

It was an impossibly huge snake.

The serpent spat out the man then slithered across the overturned boat's keel. Its flat, arrow-shaped head rose up, reflective green eyes fixing on new prey. The head snapped down like a piston, plucking another man from the water. Despite its enormous size the snake moved like greased lightning. Screaming men tried to swim away, only to be crushed beneath its weight or snapped up in its jaws.

Then there was darkness.

Ian crouched down, heart pounding, awaiting the next flash of lightning. It came.

Now the snake was slithering across the floodplain water, heading straight for the dam.

Then darkness again.

Ian realized the men on the lakeside had no idea what was coming. He fumbled with the bullhorn, desperate to warn them.

The next flash of lightning revealed something huge hurtling through the air, coming straight for Ian. Without thinking, he dove off the dam's edge, bouncing down the steep slope. He felt his shoulder crack and heard himself scream before splashing down into the lake. A twenty-foot motor boat crashed down into the water mere yards away.

The snake crested the dam, slithering down to the lakeside. Lightning reflected off its green eyes—they were locked on Ian.

Pockets of light suddenly appeared along the dark lakeshore. The laborers had lit up emergency flares and were holding them aloft.

The snake veered away from Ian, making a beeline for the flares. Despite its size, it shot through the water like a torpedo, covering the three hundred yards in the blink of an eye.

Ian heard the crack of Ursa's pistol, followed by volleys of rifle fire. The snake launched up from the water, its jaws latching on to a man clutching a flare. With a snap of its head, it tossed the man straight up. His burning flare spiraled across the horizon like a skyrocket. Terrified men tried to scramble up

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the crater lake's rim. The snake continued its onslaught, plucking five men off the incline. Others waded into the lake, only to be crushed by the snake's whipping tail.

Ian's first instinct was to dash into the rainforest to escape, but then he realized he couldn't. *If I leave here empty-handed, Margaret will die.* In the dim light he could barely make out his lakeside tent some thirty yards away. Inside it were the meteorite shards they'd gathered. They were evidence of what he'd discovered—enough to at least buy his wife a stay of execution.

Ian waded to shore then crept along the lake's edge, ignoring the distant screams. He prayed that the snake was too busy gorging itself to care about a lone man. After two minutes of stumbling through the darkness he reached the tent.

Yanking the flap aside he spotted the satchel of fragments resting on the camp table. With trembling hands, he slung it over his shoulder. One sample fell to the ground, so he scooped it up and stuffed it into his pocket.

He muttered, "Think, think, you have to survive out there," then grabbed a flashlight, bottled water, and a pair of emergency flares, stuffing them in the satchel. He turned to leave.

Something struck the tent like a cannonball, trapping him under a blanket of collapsed nylon. Ian clawed his way out and saw what had crushed the tent. Ursa was sprawled across the fabric. His body was twisted grotesquely, and one leg was severed at the knee, but he was alive. Ursa reached out, grabbing Ian's ankle, pleading with his eyes.

Ian pulled away.

Ursa screamed, "Don't leave me here, you bastard!"

Ian saw the snake slithering along the shoreline, heading straight for the tent. There was no way he could outrun it.

Ursa screamed again.

Ian whispered, "Quiet, you idiot."

Then an idea struck him. He lit one of the flares, tossed it on the ground next to Ursa and ran like hell.

Enraged, Ursa shouted, "Come back here, you son of a bitch!"

Drawn to the light and screaming, the giant serpent descended on Ursa.

Ian made an adrenaline-fueled charge up the earthen dam. In the distance he heard Ursa scream twice before being crushed in the serpent's jaws.

Reaching the crest, Ian glanced back at the lake. The snake was still on the rampage, snapping up men trying to hide in the brush. There was no hope for them. Ian slid down the other side, rocks and branches tearing at his legs until he splashed down into the floodplain. He surfaced, spitting out water while taking in the carnage around him. The *Opala* was on its side, half submerged, mangled bodies drifting around it.

The shoreline was littered with floating bodies. He spotted one forgotten motorboat moored to a post. He climbed aboard, reaching for the outboard motor, then stopped.

Too much noise. Better to gain some distance.

Using a floating log, he slowly paddled out until he passed the capsized

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Opala. After two pulls on the cord the outboard roared to life, drowning out the echoing screams behind him.

Glancing at the motor he saw that the gas gauge read below half. The boat wouldn't get him far, but that didn't matter—somehow he'd reach civilization and save his wife, even if he had to crawl.

CHAPTER TWO

Bela Adormecida Mountains, Amazonas, Brazil - 15 days later

Dr. Micah Clark stood at the peak of the Sleeping Beauty Mountains, gazing down at the fog-shrouded rainforest and winding Amazon tributaries stretching farther than the eye could see. It was the kind of photographic backdrop money couldn't buy, which was good because he didn't have any.

His camera person, Catalina Abril, shouted, "Camera's ready, boss!"

Micah said, "Okay, give me a minute," and gave himself a final once over.

Close-cropped blonde hair mussed to just the right degree—check. Logo on his signature Rolex Explorer watch facing camera—check. He smoothed out his meticulously wrinkled tan linen shirt and made sure his cargo pants were impeccably dirty. Getting it all right was critical because every thread of clothing, from his Ray-Ban sunglasses right down to his perspiration-wicking socks, was some form of product placement. Thanks to a dwindling budget, his complimentary wardrobe wasn't just a C-list celebrity perk anymore—these days he just needed the free socks.

For two seasons, his reality adventure series *Meteor Micah* had been the Outdoor Exploration Network's top show. Its combination of exotic locales, survival skills, and scientific expertise combined with wild speculation about ancient aliens had made him into a real-life Indiana Jones. Network executives had christened him a modern day "Marlboro Man"—a ruggedly handsome intellectual who appealed to everyday viewers, especially ones who wore tin foil hats.

But all idols, especially the basic cable variety, eventually topple, and this season his ratings had plummeted like a meteorite. Looking out at the majestic view he pondered the eternal question, *Where did it all go wrong?*

After a thirty-second pity party, he asked Catalina, "Do I look okay?"

Catalina said, "Give me a second," and went back to gossiping with the local farmers who'd just sold him some meteorite fragments.

Micah took the delay in stride. Catalina usually seemed more interested in chatting up his vendors than doing her myriad of jobs. But since she was technically an intern, he couldn't complain. Last season, he'd traveled with a documentary cameraman, a sound recordist, and even a makeup artist. But now, thanks to declining ratings, his entire staff consisted of a single grad student acting as camera person, research assistant and general fixer. On the plus side, Catalina was competent with a camera, along with being fluent in Portuguese and Spanish—pretty much all you could ask for from an intern getting a two-hundred-dollar-a-week stipend, plus meals.

Micah used the time to study the meteorite sample he'd just paid twenty

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dollars for. His truncated shooting schedule didn't allow any time for actual exploration or discoveries, so now he just bought whatever local farmers plowed up in their fields. At least this sample was interesting. Noting the gleaming slivers embedded in it, he mentally rehearsed his spiel. *Notice the minute traces of diamond in this piece. Could this be a fragment of some intelligently engineered probe, utilizing diamonds, one of the universe's hardest substances, as a protective shell? Blah, blah, wild speculation, yada, yada.*

Catalina was politely shooing away the farmers, who seemed intent on hanging around. Micah couldn't blame them. His intern was a striking woman of what he guesstimated as mixed Brazilian and African heritage—hitting a genetic home run on both sides. She was tall, clearly athletic, but perhaps her most attractive feature was an unwavering confidence, landing just short of arrogance. In a man it might be called swagger. She was definitely the kind of woman he was drawn to, but making advances on an intern would be the final leap into becoming a full-on television sleaze.

Catalina had just gotten rid of the farmers when something caught her eye. She yelled, "Oh shit, Faye! Micah, get over here!"

Snapping out of his inner monologue, Micah rushed over. "What's wrong?"

His nine-year-old daughter, Faye, was perched on a camp stool. With her flowing blonde hair and sweet face she could have modeled for an American Girl doll, except those dolls didn't have a Goliath beetle the size of a grapefruit clamped to their forearm.

Catalina said, "Uh, honey, I don't think you should be playing with that."

Faye giggled and said, "Why? Goliaths don't bite," then went back to petting the insect like a puppy.

Catalina asked Micah, "So you're cool with this?"

"Uh, only sort of." Micah knelt down next to his daughter and explained, "Faye, you still have to be careful, 'cause those mandibles can crush a walnut."

Faye said, "I know, they're really strong," then held her arm up to Catalina, proudly displaying the beetle. "Did you know they can lift eight hundred times their own weight?"

Catalina said, "Pretty cool. Maybe I can get her to lug this equipment."

"This one's a boy, you can tell by its horns."

Micah smiled, amazed at his daughter's encyclopedic knowledge of Amazon wildlife. Thanks to a bitter divorce he only got to spend two months a year with her, and he liked to think she'd learned it all to impress him.

He came up with a diplomatic solution. "Tell you what, honey, why don't we use him in the shot?" He looked to Catalina. "It'll be free production value."

"Our favorite kind."

Micah glanced over at Santos, their new bodyguard and driver. The six-and-a-half-foot Brazilian was slouched against the nearby Range Rover, watching disinterestedly.

Micah said, "Hey Santos, if you see her grabbing any more insects could you kinda give me a shout?"

"Not a babysitter," was his monotone response.

Despite his arctic demeanor, Santos was all you could want in a

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bodyguard—namely, a giant with a body that looked like it was made out of rebar. He was equally intimidating above the neck, with a soup bowl haircut framing a face like one of those Easter Island stone heads, except less expressive.

Micah coaxed the beetle from Faye’s arm onto his then placed the meteorite sample on the ground and rested the beetle on top of it.

“Okay, let’s get this done and head back to the lodge.”

Catalina framed up a shot and said, “Rolling.”

Micah knelt down, making a point of lifting the beetle toward camera, and said, “After days of hiking through these mountains, following accounts from local tribes, we’ve uncovered the meteorite site. But I suspect this celestial object broke up before impact, spreading fragments like this across the mountainside.” He set the beetle aside and lifted the sample. “One can clearly see the traces of diamond in this fragment, indicating a possible intelligent construction. Could this be a fragment of an intelligently engineered probe, using diamonds, one of the universe’s hardest substances, as protective armor? In the ancient past could these alien engineers have visited our world? These, my friends, are the eternal questions we’re seeking the answers to.” Micah looked into the lens with his best scholarly contemplative look then drew his hand across his throat. “Cut. I think we’ve got everything.”

Catalina lowered the camera and asked, “What about the ‘days of hiking through the mountains’? Don’t we have to shoot that stuff?”

“There’s a bunch of footage of me hiking through mountains from last season that didn’t get used, so we’ll just cut that in. I’m even wearing the same shirt.”

“Whatever you say, boss. But it kinda feels like we’re phoning this episode in.”

Micah shrugged. “They might not even air it anyway.”

“Really? Are you officially canceled?”

“Cancellation would be too merciful. OEN still has a year on my contract, so they’ll just keep slashing the budget until I can’t breathe. They’ve already given my time slot to a guy who lets bullet ants and scorpions sting him. I mean, how do you compete with a weekly suicide attempt?”

“Sorry to hear that, boss.” Picking up a camera case, she added, “Look on the bright side, maybe a murder hornet will kill the new guy and you’ll get your time slot back.”

“I love your optimism.” Micah saw Faye picking up the beetle again. “Honey, why don’t you just leave him be?”

With a deep sigh, Faye asked, “Can’t we take him with us?”

“Do you think he really wants to live in a cage?”

Faye begrudgingly said, “No,” and set him down with all the faux drama a nine-year-old girl could muster.

“Good girl.”

Catalina said, “Maybe you should put her in the show, she’s a natural.”

In a gruff tone, Micah replied, “The network keeps saying the same thing, but there’s no way I’m dragging her into child star oblivion. In a couple years

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she'd wind up robbing a liquor store with Honey Boo-Boo."

Catalina was taken aback, and he realized his answer had been sharper than intended.

"Sorry about that, Catalina, it's kind of a sore point."

His three-year television whirlwind had already cost him time with Faye; priceless years he'd never get back. There was no way he was going to place his daughter on the sacrificial altar of ratings.

Putting his arm around Faye, Micah said, "How about we head back to the lodge and have dinner? If I get any hungrier I might just eat your new pet."

"Yuck."

"Yuck? Your grandpa taught me how to roast 'em up. Their shell's like a built-in bowl. Tastes like chicken."

"That's super gross."

"Well, when you grow up in the jungle like I did, you learn to eat what's around."

Faye said, "I'd rather become a vegetarian," and trotted over to the Range Rover.

Santos watched Catalina lug the cases over, making no effort to help.

"Don't trouble yourself, big guy," Catalina said, shoving the case into the rear compartment. "I've got it."

Santos just grunted.

Micah gazed out at the rainforest again, wondering where it all went so wrong. Once he'd been a rising star in the field of planetary geology, until his theories about ancient aliens reduced him to a laughing stock among the scientific community. But thanks to some talk show appearances and his photogenic looks he'd been wooed into reality television. For three years he'd traveled the globe on OEN's dime, certain that he'd uncover evidence to prove his discredited theories. But he'd found nothing, and his media meal ticket was slipping away. He'd officially run out of rope.

He muttered, "Maybe if I start drinking now, I can get on one of those celebrity rehab shows."

"Sorry, I didn't catch that, boss."

Micah had been too lost in thought to notice Catalina standing behind him. "Uh, nothing. Let's head back to the lodge."

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The Range Rover bounced down an unpaved road threading through the pitch-black rainforest. Santos was at the wheel, his soulless eyes locked on the road. Catalina slouched in the passenger seat trying to nod off, but her efforts were thwarted by the crater-sized potholes. Micah and Faye huddled in the backseat with a flashlight, studying the meteorite samples he'd bought.

Faye asked, "Did you and Grandpa really eat bugs when you were a kid?"

Micah said, "Once in a while, mostly so I'd know how to survive in the jungle. But sometimes we just ate them to be polite. In Vietnam, scorpions were the local delicacy, so if we wanted the locals to help us find all the rare plants and rocks we had to partake. You getting hungry yet?"

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Faye giggled. “Yeah, but not for scorpions.”

“I don’t think the lodge is serving those.” That reminded Micah of something. “Hey Catalina, I need you to get some shots of the eco lodge before we leave tomorrow. Make sure you shoot the sign.”

“More product placement?”

“It’s the backbone of poverty row television.” He went back to studying the fragments. “These are actually pretty interesting.”

Peering over his shoulder, Faye asked, “Can I look?”

“Sure.” Micah handed her the magnifying glass. “If you look close you can see the flecks of diamond.”

Straining to see, Faye asked, “Does that make it valuable?”

“Only to science. Some people think the diamonds are caused by carbon being super compressed during impact.”

“I bet that’s not what you think.”

“Right as usual. I think they’re fragments of something larger that came here with the diamonds already part of it.”

“Came from where?”

“Well, that’s kind of the mystery.”

“Are there spacemen? Mom says you believe in spacemen.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet she says a lot of things.” Micah’s ex-wife was a university professor and staunch academic who called Micah’s theories, “The worst kind of pseudo-science.” She’d even brought it up during their custody hearing.

Faye said, “Now that you’re done shooting can we go look for the pink river dolphins?”

“We can try, but they’re really rare.”

“Please?”

The elusive pink river dolphins, technically known as botos, had become Faye’s latest obsession, running a close second to monkeys.

“Okay, I promise we’ll find some.” Micah noticed headlights trailing behind them. “That’s weird, an unpaved road’s not usually where you run into other people.”

Catalina said, “We’ve got taillights in front too.” She turned to Santos. “Should we be worried?”

Santos shook his head then pulled a folded sheet of paper from under his vest. He passed it back to Micah and said, “I need you to read this.”

Micah asked, “What is it?”

“Read it.”

He did and felt his blood run cold.

The neatly typed note read, “Dr. Clark, you are being abducted. I recommend you come along quietly to avoid upsetting your daughter. If you resist we will take you by force, potentially endangering the little girl. Please pass this note to your associate and advise her to comply. I assure you that nobody will be harmed.”

Micah’s fingers tightened around the paper.

Faye asked, “What’s wrong, Dad?”

Pasting a smile on his face, Micah said, “Nothing, honey.” Then he leaned

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forward, passing the note to Catalina and whispering, “Read this, but don’t react.”

She read it, and Micah was relieved to see how calmly she took being kidnapped.

Catalina handed the paper back to Santos, asking, “Is this your doing?”

Santos replied, “No,” without taking his eyes off the unpaved road.

Micah put his arm around Faye, cheerfully informing her, “Honey, we’re not going to the hotel.”

“Why?”

“Well, we’re going on a little trip.”

“Where?”

“It’s going to be a surprise.”

Catalina muttered, “No shit.”

#

They drove in silence for the next forty minutes. Luckily, Faye’s backpack contained an Android tablet loaded with episodes of *Awesome Animals*. The show kept her from picking up on the tension.

Micah leaned forward, whispering to Catalina, “Don’t worry; I’ve been kidnapped twice and made it out safe and sound both times. Hell, it turned out to be the season two cliffhanger.”

She asked, “But were you really kidnapped or was it all BS?”

“Nope, it was genuine. Once in Sudan and another time in Indonesia.”

Santos said, “Stop whispering,” his voice still monotone.

Catalina noticed how Santos’s English had miraculously improved, with barely a trace of an accent. The kind of English that was only taught at professional language schools or in the military—she was betting on the latter.

Santos slipped a satellite phone out of his vest and pressed a pre-programmed number. In Portuguese he said, “Ten minutes out,” and hung up.

Catalina said, “Wow, Santa brought somebody a fancy phone.”

“No talking.”

The three vehicles turned down a steep, muddy incline, putting their four-wheel drives to the test.

Catalina watched Santos expertly use a combination of downshifting and clutch, keeping the vehicle glued to the muddy path.

Definitely military, she thought.

The path ended at the bank of a wide tributary—one of a thousand smaller offshoots of the mighty Amazon.

Micah said, “I think this is *Rio Curicuriari*.”

Santos said, “No talking.”

The moment they stopped, work lights came on, revealing a dilapidated boat house connected to a sagging log dock. A gleaming De Havilland Beaver, single-engine floatplane, was moored at the end of the pier.

Santos said, “You two in the backseat, out.”

Micah slipped Faye’s headphones off and told her, “It’s time to go, honey.”

Faye put her tablet away, asking, “Are we there?”

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“Not yet. I think we’re taking a plane ride first ... aren’t we?”

Santos nodded.

Micah grabbed Faye’s backpack and helped her out. He was swept away for a moment by the intoxicating sensory medley of the Amazon. The smell of decaying vegetation mixed with the chorus of insects and frogs always took him back to his childhood, accompanying his parents on their geological and botanical expeditions.

Once they were out, Santos told Catalina, “Get out and walk directly to the plane.”

She said, “You would have made a marvelous tour guide.”

Santos’s hand shot out, clamping onto her wrist like a vice. “Remember something, I was hired to fetch him and the little girl. You’re optional, so don’t get smart.”

Trying to pull away, Catalina said, “You’re hurting me.”

Santos released her wrist. “When I want to hurt you, you’ll know it.”

Rubbing her arm, she said, “Why Mr. Santos, your English has certainly improved,” and hopped out before he could react.

Men spilled out of the lead and follow vehicles, forming a loose cordon around the trio, herding them towards the plane. Santos walked several paces behind.

Micah caught a glimpse of the handguns stuffed in the waists of the men’s pants. Tapping Faye’s shoulder, he pointed to the plane. “Pretty cool plane, right?” It diverted her attention from the armed men.

Santos knelt down to Faye and, with an out of character smile, asked, “Faye, remember when you told me you liked *Pepperidge Farm* cookies?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I made sure they have some on the plane for you.”

The little girl’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Yup, they’re waiting for you.”

“Come on, Dad, there are cookies,” Faye yelled, almost dragging him down the pier.

As Catalina walked past Santos, she asked, “Do I get cookies too?”

“Watch it, *cadela*, people disappear out here all the time.”

They climbed into the six-passenger plane. Once they were seated, Santos doled out bottled water along with the promised cookies. He sat down across from them, his shoulders taking up two seats.

Micah asked him, “Not to be difficult, but is there any chance we’ll see our luggage again? It’s all at the hotel.”

“It’s already been loaded into the cargo compartment. You checked out of the eco lodge this morning, leaving a generous tip. So don’t expect them to call in a missing persons report. You even posted a Yelp review.”

“Five stars I hope.”

Faye offered one of the cookies to Catalina.

Micah watched her sniff it then lick the edge before biting into it. He thought, *She seems pretty savvy for someone on her first kidnapping.*

Micah encouraged Faye to put on her headphones, allowing the adults to

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speak freely.

Swallowing a mouthful of Mint Milano, Catalina asked Santos, “How’d you guys find these out here in the boonies? Is there a Costco in the rainforest?”

Santos glared at her.

Micah said, “It’s their way of showing they’ve done their homework on us. These gentlemen are pros; I mean right out of our vehicle, straight onto a floatplane. That takes experience. Hell, when I was kidnapped in Sudan we had to walk for two days because their truck broke down. They used me as a pack mule.”

Santos said, “Thank you,” without a trace of emotion.

Catalina asked Micah, “Your bosses are gonna pay the ransom to get you back, right?”

Micah laughed. “They wouldn’t pay ten cents to get me back.”

“Great thing to say in front of our kidnappers.”

Looking directly at Santos, Micah said, “These guys already know that. They want something, but it ain’t money.”

Santos stared back like an Easter Island tourism poster.

The engine roared to life, and the plane bobbed forward across the water.

Buckling Faye’s seatbelt, Micah asked Santos, “How far are we going?”

Santos didn’t respond.

Catalina whispered, “These De Havilland Beavers are only good for about five hundred miles, so it must be someplace here in Amazona.”

Micah looked at her, surprised by her expertise.

With a shrug, she said, “I dated a rich guy once.”

“I see.”

Santos cut in with, “No whispering.”

Thirty seconds later, they were airborne.