

Chapter 1

Dr. Nicholas Randall could feel the noose-like effect of the humidity choking the breath from his body. Perspiration slicked down his back like a sudden waterfall forming after a heavy spring rain. The conditions were unbearable, but he pushed onward and ever deeper into the Amazon. Normally, Randall would have made the trip in the cooler, drier months, but his benefactor had been specific. The trip had to be made immediately or the funding would be forfeited, so Randall and his small group from the University of Lima found themselves slogging through the lush vegetation during the hottest and wettest time of the year. They traveled without speaking, the dwindling sunlight fading through the foliage.

Once considered a gifted archeology student, Randall was now deemed an outcast in the field for his controversial theories. Randall believed that someone or something had intervened in the development of the indigenous population and had helped propel their technology forward at a staggering rate. It was a theory he had first conceived on a field assignment as a graduate student almost thirty years ago and had almost destroyed his career. In fact, had it not been for his longtime friend and colleague, Dr. Francisco Andrade, Randall would have been forced out of the field years ago. Only Francisco's support had made this trip possible, and Randall realized that this excursion was his last chance to redeem his reputation. Now he found himself deep in the rainforest with only his guide, a linguistics expert from the University of Lima, and his two graduate assistants, Phillip Drew and Mike Gomes in tow. They needed to find the ruins quickly or they would be forced to make camp in the middle of the jungle before they were consumed by the encroaching darkness. Making matters worse, they had lost contact with their home base two days prior and were running low on supplies.

“Finally, there’s the entrance up ahead,” Ernesto the linguistics specialist said. Dropping his backpack, he let out a loud groan for everyone to hear. Clearly uncomfortable being out in the middle of the jungle during the summer, he made no effort to mask his feelings.

Randall pushed past him, straining to see the small opening in an otherwise solid wall of jungle vines and plants. At first, he wasn’t sure if Ernesto was right, but then he spotted the entrance, carved into the solid rock in the side of a mountain. After days of searching, they had finally arrived.

Amaro Angarra, the local guide who had led them to the site, paused, staring into the dark opening. His body language spoke of his reluctance to enter.

“Ernesto, ask Amaro if he’s going in.” Randall said, referring to his guide.

After a brief exchange, Ernesto replied. “No, he says it’s forbidden for his people to enter the sacred ruins.”

“Phil and Mike, come with me. Ernesto, wait here with Amaro. We’ll scout inside the ruins and then figure out where to set up camp.”

The three ventured through the small opening. The passageway wound its way down a twisting ledge, which had been carefully cut into the stony surface. Randall’s pulse quickened as he examined the tunnel. He ran his hand along the rock wall, marveling at how the surface felt as smooth as glass. One thought entered his mind: *This wasn’t done with primitive tools.*

Randall stepped back from the wall and shined his light straight down the passageway. He realized that the opening was a perfect square, the corners fitting together with a precision unlike any he had seen in past ruins. Next, he trained his light on the floor and traced the pathway from the entrance as far as his beam would illuminate. The floor was etched with a

repeating diamond pattern and was clear of any dust and debris. Someone was maintaining the tunnel.

Although the Inca had been skilled artisans, Randall was certain that this tunnel and what lay inside the mountain weren't Incan remains. A sense of foreboding mingled with his excitement as he realized the enormity of the ruins and their implications. Whoever had built this entrance possessed advanced machining technology.

"Dr. Randall, take a look at this!"

"What is it? Phil, where are you?"

"I'm around the corner. You have to see this!"

Randall turned the corner then immediately stopped. The path led into a single large room with intricately carved symbols on one wall. The room was entirely dark except for the beams of their flashlights, and Phil was standing next to the wall trying to decipher the writing.

"What is this?" Phil asked.

"I'm not sure."

Dr. Randall held up his light for a closer look and studied the writing carefully. He traced a finger along the smooth grooves that formed the shapes. Beads of sweat gathered on his temple and his mouth went dry. He barely noticed Michael had entered the room.

"It resembles Cuneiform, but that doesn't make sense. How could one group of Incans use a completely different form of writing from the rest of their empire? Besides, Cuneiform was used in southern Mesopotamia, and that's 8,000 miles away. What's going on here, Professor?" Phil asked.

"That's a good question, but I'm not sure I can answer it. I don't think this is Cuneiform. In fact, it doesn't seem to resemble any written language I've seen before." At least not until I

stepped into the tablet room of Paititi, Randall reflected, remembering the first time he witnessed the great jungle city of Amaro's tribe.

Randall studied the symbols intently. There was something almost familiar about the way they were arranged. They reminded him of something. Something that was so obvious and yet so elusive that the professor couldn't put his finger on it. He ran his hand along the grooves of the symbols and then through the grooves surrounding one grouping. The grooves around the groupings were all squares, almost like ...

A distant cracking noise and a horrific scream echoed from the entrance of the ruins.

"What the hell was that?" Phil asked.

"Ernesto, are you there? Come in, over," Mike said into his radio. The only reply was static.

"Ernesto, can you hear me?"

Still no reply.

"I can't reach anyone on the radio."

Suddenly, the group heard a new sound. The faint but distinct sound of shuffling boots and short, muffled voices. Someone was coming, and the three of them were trapped inside the chamber. The only path out the way they had come in. Randall's mind worked feverishly.

"Do you hear that?" Phil asked, jerking up his head. He peered around the corner and shone his light down the tunnel. The rocky wall above his head exploded in a hail of gunfire.

"Holy crap, someone tried to kill me! What do we do?"

"Were those gunshots?" Randall asked.

"Yes! We need to get out of here!"

Randall's heart raced. Either someone had followed them and wanted the contents of the ruins for themselves or the keepers of the ruins wanted it to remain a secret.

The footfalls were getting louder – the shooters were almost in the chamber.

Randall could hear the sound of one gunman giving orders to the others. They would be in the chamber any moment.

“I don't want to die here,” Phil whispered.

Randall pulse pounded in his ears.

The killers were just outside the chamber.

Randall reached out tentatively and touched the symbols in the wall. The wall folded away from him.

Startled, he jumped back. An opening had appeared in the solid rock.

Randall quickly pushed Phil and Mike through the entrance, following closely behind. He turned and shined his light, realizing that a section of rock had swung inward like a door.

“Help me close this!”

The three men pushed with every ounce of strength they could muster. The rock door swung closed just as they heard heavy boot steps entering the outer chamber.

“Where are they?” a voice said from the other side of the wall.

Randall's heart raced wildly. He bent over, trying to catch his breath.

Phil tapped his shoulder. “What do we do now?” he whispered.

Randall shone his light around the room. Unlike the outer chamber, there was writing on three of the four walls. Randall gestured to the writing. Phil nodded his understanding: the key to their escape was the writing. They were safe for now, but for how long?

Chapter 2

In the complete dark of her bedroom, Dr. Samantha Randall was sound asleep in her bed. The stillness was shattered by the ringing of the telephone.

“What time is it?” Samantha said groggily.

Searching for her glasses with one hand as she fumbled for the phone with the other, Samantha glanced at the clock, which read 3:12 a.m.

“Who is this?” Samantha asked in a sleepy voice.

“Samantha, is that you?”

Sam struggled to clear the cobwebs from her mind. The voice sounded familiar but she couldn't quite place it.

“Sam, are you there? It's Francisco.”

“I'm here. Do you realize what time it is in my neck of the woods?”

“Sorry to wake you, but I have some urgent news about your father.”

Sam's heartbeat quickened. “What's going on? Is Dad alright?”

“He's disappeared. He was leading an expedition in Peru and was supposed to arrive at the site today. We've been waiting for him to check in with us, but we haven't heard from him. In fact, I haven't spoken with him in days. We've tried to contact him several times, but we haven't had any luck. I'm worried, Sam. Your father normally checks in like clockwork.”

The news hit Samantha like a hard slap to the face. Sam and her father had barely spoken since her mother's death nearly three years earlier.

"What can I do?" she said quietly.

"You understand how your father thinks better than just about anyone. He left some notes at the base station, but we're having a hard time trying to understand what they mean. We need you to fly down here and join a search team to try to find him. We have his starting point and can put you in contact with someone who can help you retrace his path."

Samantha sat in the darkness of her room contemplating the situation.

"Sam, please"

"I'll see what I can do. I have to pack and find a flight. I should be able to catch a plane by the end of the day."

"I booked you on a flight leaving at 6:35 a.m. Time is of the essence; we need to find them quickly. This jungle can be unforgiving."

Chapter 3

Nick Randall continued to decipher the writing on the walls. He had decided to start with the far left wall and work his way around. The symbols were arranged in neat rows, forming large pictographs similar to Egyptian Hieroglyphics. What they had discovered in this inner chamber was amazing, but Randall had no time to enjoy it.

Minutes earlier, all activity and sounds had ceased from the outer chamber. Something had happened that caused their pursuers to stop searching the room for them. As a result, the inner chamber was cast into an eerie quietness.

The silence was shattered by a high-pitched, static-filled whistling noise coming from Mike's belt. His radio was still on.

"The sound came from this direction," a voice called out from the outer chamber. The words were followed by pounding on the wall separating the two rooms. Their pursuers had located them.

"Mike, your radio!" Phil yelled.

Mike switched it off, but it was too late.

"I can hear them. Get the C-4."

Panic replaced concern as Randall raced to decipher the writing, hearing the unmistakable sound of several men exiting the outer chamber.

“Dr. Randall, hurry!” Mike said.

Randall struggled to interpret the strange writing. He needed more time.

“This symbol, I can’t figure it out!” Randall blurted.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of men entering the outer chamber and placing something against the wall.

“Everyone clear out.” The words were followed by the sound of shuffling boots exiting the other room.

“We have to do something!” Phil said.

“Wait,” Randall said. “If I’m right about this, I think we might have a way out of here!”

Randall gently pressed against the symbols on the wall. A faint humming sound emanated from somewhere nearby.

“Did you hear ...?” Phil began to say, but before the words were even out of his mouth, the students and professor felt the sensation of weightlessness. In a moment’s time, their lights went out and they were engulfed by total darkness.