

EarthCore

by Scott Sigler, 1969–

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This book is dedicated to Michael R. Mennenga and Evo Terra.

Prologue

March 15, 1942

Wilford Igoe Jr. wrapped his fingers around the pumpkin-shaped rock, steeled himself with a deep breath, and pushed with all his strength. The rock slid back a half inch, accompanied by the sound of stone on stone. He held his breath, waiting, listening for further grinding sounds, for the sound of settling rocks—the sounds of certain death.

But no sounds came. He let his breath out in a long sigh of relieved tension. *No point in relaxing*, he told himself, *I'm just going to have to go through it a dozen more times until I clear this rock.*

"Just a little more, Will," said his friend Samuel, who stood behind him in the cramped cave, watching for any signs of settling. Will could only grunt in response. The light from Samuel's mining helmet jittered from side to side, up and down, bouncing all over the rough gray rock that filled Will's hands. Will's own helmet lay behind him and to the right—he'd had to take it off to squeeze into the narrow crawl space among the cluster of ancient boulders.

The headlamps' illumination was the first light this pitch-black place had known in decades, possibly centuries. Sunlight had never graced the interior of the cave; they were too far into the zone of perpetual darkness.

"Stop moving that damn light, Samuel," Will said, grunting out the words. "If I move this rock the wrong way we all die." Samuel's light stopped bouncing, but only for a moment, then began fluttering about again, following the excited movements of his head.

Will fought down his irritation and tried to concentrate, which wasn't easy considering his position. He was wedged into the crawl space that he and Samuel and Douglas had made during the last three days. The space was part of a much larger tunnel that led steadily down into the mountain. Will's head was at the low end of that incline, his body lying in powdery cave silt. It felt like going down a slide headfirst, although he wasn't actually moving, especially if he couldn't budge that boulder.

But removing the rock wasn't the real problem. He had to move it right, he had to move it just so. The boulders surrounding him were remnants of an ancient cave-in. You couldn't tell how these rocks settled against one another. Move out a "linchpin" rock, even if it was a tiny one, and sudden settling would crush anything lying below.

"Come on Will," Samuel said. His excited voice rang off the dead stone walls. "Try a little to the left."

"Up yours, Anderson," Will said. He wrestled with the chunk of limestone, his thick arms shaking with a combination of concerted effort and exhaustion.

Thousands of years ago this passage had housed a swiftly churning underground river. Now all that remained of the ancient stream was the tunnel itself and a floor of bone-dry silt, two inches thick and as fine as high-grade flour. That same silt coated Will's sweaty skin.

Sweat dripped from his face, the inverted position making it seem as if it ran up his neck, up his cheeks and into his stinging eyes. Will heard his own labored breathing as he wrestled with the rock, which had already split open two of his knuckles. His breath sounded loud—not because of the claustrophobically confined space, but because there were no background sounds. A hundred yards into the cave and all sound ceased. Not even the insects made noise, although that far down the insects were strange indeed—blind crickets with fragile antenna twice as long as their body, tiny beetles that burrowed ceaselessly into the sand, and ghostly-white, long-legged spiders that had never felt the faintest trickle of sun.

"Sam, keep that fucking light still!" To Sam, the opportunity to take the cave deep into the mountain's layers—to travel into the mountain as if they were a blood cell in the circulatory system of the very stone itself—was like heaven on Earth. Sam couldn't wait to get through this cave-in and continue exploring the tunnel. Will wanted to know what lay beyond as well, but for the moment he didn't give a good goddamn about the tunnel or geology or the fact that he had to piss like a racehorse. His world narrowed to his hands, his arms, and the damn stubborn pumpkin-shaped boulder streaked with his blood.

"Try a little to the left, Will," Samuel said again.

"Yeah, thanks for the tip, Einstein," Will said. But for lack of a better idea, he pushed it hard to the left—and it slid a good two inches.

"Oh shoot!" Samuel said. "Holy moley, it's moving!"

"I think I've almost got it," Will said, grunting and panting. He had it now. Oh, it wanted to fight him, but it was too late, he had that bastard of a rock and he wasn't letting go.

Will felt the thud of footsteps approaching from up the tunnel. Douglas Nadia moved with all the grace of a drunken elephant. Will always wondered how someone so thin could make so much noise.

"Where have you been, Douglas?" Samuel asked. "We've been working on this boulder for the last twenty minutes."

"What do you mean *we*?" Will said. He pushed, and with each fractional movement he listened for the sounds of settling rock, but nothing moved except the pumpkin-shaped boulder.

"I did a little chiseling back up at the plateau," Douglas said. His thick Texan drawl betrayed his excitement.

Samuel sounded immensely annoyed. "Douglas, please tell me you didn't carve your name on the tunnel mouth."

"Hell no. I carved all our names. Hey, you think we'll find any more cave drawings, or maybe another goofy knife like last time?"

"Who cares about that?" Samuel asked. "Once we're through, and if this tunnel continues to descend, I surmise we'll drop below the next sedimentary layer within fifty feet or so. That will give us a real good look at this mountain's composition."

"You crack me up, Anderson," Douglas said, his sharp laugh bouncing off the rough, narrow walls. "We've found some lost Injun tribe in here, maybe even with buried treasure, and all you can think of is geology. You're a screwball."

The two continued to babble, but Will tuned them out. The rock was the last obstacle that stood between them and continued exploration. They'd found the opening while researching Samuel's Ph.D. thesis. The Wah Wah Mountains were only a three-hour drive from Brigham Young University, and yet were a wild and obscure treasure of geological wonders. The thick limestone mountains seemed to rise straight out of southwestern Utah's scrub-brush deserts.

Five months earlier, they'd been a thousand feet up the side of an unnamed peak when they discovered a small plateau and a dark, cramped opening. The opening led into a long, slender tunnel that traveled well over one hundred yards into the mountain before dead-ending at the ancient cave-in. Low on supplies, they'd decided to head home and try again later.

Now, well supplied and eager to explore the caves, they had to clear a path through the cumbersome boulders to access the tunnel they knew lay beyond. For three days they'd probed the cave-in, placing small charges of dynamite to help break up the tightly packed rocks. Following each blast, they labored to clear loose stones. It had been three days of noisy, backbreaking work, but the intensive effort was all but forgotten as Will slowly worried the last stone clear.

That stone finally came loose with a horrible, grinding sound of protest. As Will pushed it free, they held their collective breaths, waiting for the suspended rockfall to give way and crush them all.

Nothing happened.

"Take that," Will said, his voice an exhausted whisper. "Take that, you piece of shit."

"Quit cursing," Samuel said. "Hurry up and get out of there, will you?"

Will wanted to squeeze out of the opening, sit up, and wring Samuel's neck, but he didn't have the strength. Samuel and Douglas each took an ankle and pulled, hauling Will out like a dead animal.

Samuel rushed to the opening, laying flat and letting his light probe the newfound depths.

"How's it look?" Douglas asked, leaning on Samuel's shoulder and craning his head for a peek.

Samuel's exuberant yell pealed off the stone wall, accompanied by the hint of an echo from the unexplored passage beyond. "Looks like a straight shot! As far as I can see—at least another fifty yards!"

Samuel whooped triumphantly. Douglas's Texan yelp joined in. Will lay flat on his back, stomach heaving, sweat pooling in sandy little lumps on the cave floor.

Douglas slapped at Will's thigh, "Get up, lazybones. Lookit Samuel—he's already crawling in."

Will remained on his back, breathing deeply, but turned his head to see Samuel's skinny body wiggle through the narrow opening. Will thought it looked like the rocks were a giant stone mouth with pursed lips, and Samuel was a piece of slurped spaghetti.

"You go on ahead," Will said.

Douglas again whacked Will's thigh. "Get up, rich boy."

With effort, Will lifted himself to one elbow. "Doug, you hit me again and I swear I'll—"

"Fellas," Samuel interrupted. Both Douglas and Will jumped slightly as Samuel's head suddenly reappeared in the narrow opening. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Douglas and Will said together.

"That sound," Samuel said. A lock of his thin blond hair fell free from under his helmet, dangling on his high forehead. Only his head and hands were visible. In the poor lighting, he looked like a talking guillotine victim perched on a wall of tan and red boulders.

"Sounded like sand blowing across the desert or something like that," Samuel said. "Didn't you hear it?"

"Didn't hear a thing," Douglas said. Will simply fell to his back again, staring back down the pitch-black tunnel, ignoring the overexuberant Samuel. Sometimes he hated that kid's nonstop energy.

"Maybe there's a connecting tunnel down here and there's some air circulation," Samuel said quietly. "Oh, forget it. Come on, fellas, let's see where this thing leads."

"I think rich boy is staying here," Douglas said, aiming a slap at Will's thigh but pulling back at the last second, avoiding contact.

Will said nothing, merely raised his hand, extended his middle finger, and let the hand whump heavily back into dry silt.

Samuel's head disappeared into the dark hole. Douglas laughed and followed him headfirst into the mouth, working his way into the confined opening.

Will lay motionless, eyes closed, listening to his friends' excited laughter fade into nothingness. He'd catch up to the goldbrickers in a moment, he just needed to rest. The cave was so peaceful, so still. He'd just close his eyes for a few

minutes, just relax in the motionless, timeless caverns. Just a catnap, perhaps, and then—

His eyes flew open, yet he remained deathly still. He'd heard the faintest echo of a noise, a noise that somehow didn't belong in that serene place. A faint clicking, the sound of metal tapping rock. And another sound, something he couldn't put his finger on and yet it stirred recollections of Chicago, his hometown.

He strained to grasp the noise again, as if by concentrating his hearing he could tear free of the thick veil of silence enveloping the tunnel. Not moving, not breathing, not understanding the cause of his sudden fear, he listened.

And heard the noises again.

click-click, click, click-click

The clicking, followed by that hissing, breathy, scraping sound. He immediately understood why the noise made Samuel think of a sandstorm, but that analogy wasn't quite right. Samuel had spent all twenty-two years of his life in the deserts of southern Utah. For Will, however, the sound brought back memories of Chicago's powerful weather.

It was the sound of dry, windblown leaves and loose paper hissing across concrete streets and sidewalks. But unlike steady gusts of Chicago wind, the new sound ebbed and flowed with a jerky, stop-start feel. It reminded Will of another noise, a noise he'd learned to watch out for since he'd started hiking into the mountains with Samuel and Douglas some three years ago—the malignant sound of a rattlesnake's warning.

He fought down a creeping panic and a sudden, clutching stab of claustrophobia. His reaction to the strange noise was primitive, instinctive, and raw.

Will rolled to his knees and peered into the hole he'd labored so long to create. He felt a strong urge to run, but his friends were in there. He stared into the tunnel, listening to the bone-dry hissing-rattling sound grow and swell—until another, more recognizable sound joined the approaching noise.

The sound of a man screaming billowed up from some unseen place far down the tunnel. Will knew it was Samuel, although he'd never before heard Samuel scream. It was a high, piercing noise, almost feminine, full of agony and terror that transcended either sex. The scream lasted only a few seconds, faded to a single, mournful, fearful moan, then ceased.

Will forced himself to remain rooted to the spot. He couldn't summon the courage to cram himself into the narrow opening, to crawl farther into the mountain's belly, but he could keep himself from a cowardly flight while his friends remained in the tunnel.

He saw a bouncing light before he heard the rhythmic pound of heavy footsteps and the strained breathing of a man running for his life. He recognized Douglas, pounding hard and fast up the sandy incline, blood smearing his face and covering his chest as if someone had splashed him with a great bucket of gore. Douglas fell hard, his face skidding in the loose dirt, his helmet rolling and bouncing like a decapitated head. Ignoring the lost helmet, he scrambled to his feet and ran some more, kicking up arcing streams of the fine cave silt with each desperate step.

Confusion and panic gripping his voice and thoughts, Will screamed to his friend. "Douglas! What's happening?"

Douglas said nothing. His eyes were wide, their whites shining intently in the glow of Will's headlamp.

Douglas closed the distance quickly. Will saw strange flashing lights and movement behind his sprinting friend—the subtle, rushing form of something his mind couldn't place. Before he could register the image, Douglas dove for the narrow opening and blocked all sight into the deep tunnel.

Douglas tried to worm his way through the tight bottleneck, but panic slowed his efforts. His hands lashed forward more like he was drowning than crawling through a mountain. His knuckles burst open each time they slammed into jagged, unforgiving rock.

"Hold on Doug, calm down!" Will grabbed at his friend's flailing arms and bloody hands. "Let me pull you out!" Douglas made noises that weren't words. Spittle flew from his wide-open mouth, splattering against his face, mixing with the blood that Will knew once belonged to Samuel.

Will pulled and Douglas started to slide through, but whatever had been chasing him caught up and pulled back—hard. Will lost his grip on Douglas's blood-slick skin. Doug's hands grasped desperately at the rocks, his fingers as taut and rigid as dry sticks scattered by the desert wind. Douglas's eyes somehow grew even wider and his mouth opened with a throat-ripping scream that made Will want to cover his ears and run.

Will once again fought down his urge to flee. He dove forward, grabbing Douglas's left arm just as the unseen assailant yanked again. Douglas lurched backward into the darkness, into the opening. Will pulled with all his might, fighting to keep his friend alive. The strange lights flickered inside the tunnel, coming from whatever played tug-of-war with Douglas's body.

Will planted his feet on the same boulder he'd worked so hard to move, arched his back, and heaved with every last ounce of strength.

From inside the opening, Will saw a flash of something silver. A sudden release of opposite pressure made him fall backward on his ass, as if his opponent in the tug-of-war had just dropped the rope.

Only it wasn't a rope he'd been pulling.

Will looked down, even as the urge to run claimed his mind, even as he scrambled backward, trying to get to his feet. In his grasp he clutched Douglas's bloody mess of a hand—which had been neatly severed just above the wrist with a cut as clean as that of a butcher's meat-saw.

Silhouetted in the lone spotlight of his headlamp, the only light in the eternally black cave, he saw blood patter down in long drips to the silt below. The radius and ulna gleamed white and oozed goopy marrow. The darkness seemed to close in around him like a noxious cloud.

But it wasn't all dark.

Flickers of colored light still sparkled from the opening, playing off the rough gray rocks as they quickly grew brighter—whatever had taken Samuel was coming through the opening.

Good-Samaritan time was over.

Will tossed the hand aside and scrambled to his feet. As he did, he heard movement, the scratchy rasp of something sliding through the narrow opening. It came after him, those strange lights flashing maliciously. Will didn't look back. Fueled by sheer terror, he scrambled up the narrow tunnel, attacking the incline like an animal dashing away from a predator. If he could just make it back to the opening, back to camp, out of the narrow tunnel and into the sunlight, maybe he could escape. Maybe this thing couldn't leave the cave.

He clung to that hope as he made his desperate dash. Chest heaving, limbs screaming white-hot from fatigue, at last he saw sunlight. With a last burst of energy, he escaped the shaft and made it to the small clearing outside.

Wilford Igoe Jr. didn't make it any farther.

Article from *The Y News*, Brigham Young University
April 4, 1942

Graduate Students Missing
Presumed lost in Caves
By Shannon Carmichael

Today police declared three Brigham Young graduate students missing. The three geology students were doing fieldwork in the Wah Wah Mountains in western Utah.

Samuel J. Anderson, 22, Douglas Nadia, 21, and Wilford Igoe Jr., 22, were doing research in the remote area. Officials became concerned when Anderson's parents contacted the university, saying that he was due home on March 27. Utah State Police hiked out to their last reported location, which sits at an elevation of 3,500 feet.

"It was difficult reaching the site," said Henry Isbey of the Utah State Police. "We had a plane fly over their last reported location, but couldn't find anything. We hiked up and found no sign of them, not even a campsite."

Police officials said the search could prove difficult because of the terrain, and because the students have been in the hills for almost a month with no contact. Isbey added that it's impossible to know when the students ran into trouble.

"As far as we know, they may have been missing for two or three weeks," Isbey said.

School officials said they would do anything in their power to help find the students.

BOOK I

Opportunity.

Chapter 1

July 30, 2008

Sonny McGuinness sat at a corner table, staring angrily at the longhaired Indian sitting across from him. The bar was dark with shadow despite the noonday sun that blazed on shuttered windows. They had the corner of the bar to themselves, not because there were only ten people in the place, but rather because both of them smelled as if they hadn't bathed in weeks. Sonny's shocking-white, unkempt beard framed a scowl that furrowed his deeply wrinkled, dark-black face. The skin around his eyes was somewhat lighter than the rest of his onyx complexion, a light chocolate color, giving him an odd reverse-mask appearance. He drank his beer as if it would douse his sudden burst of temper.

"Bullshit," Sonny said. "You ain't found no Silver Spring."

"Hey, man, don't get hostile," said the Indian. "You said you were a prospector, so I just thought I'd share a tale with you. You believe what you like, man." He drawled out the word "man" so it sounded long, smooth, and mellow. The Indian sipped at his double shot of Red Star vodka.

The mention of the Silver Spring caused their first conversational pause in over an hour. Sonny had entered the bar planning to drink alone, as he usually did, when he spotted a man with a telltale head of long, straight, black hair. Sonny had introduced himself and bet a beer he could guess the Indian's tribe on the first try. The Indian's name was Dennis Diving-Bird. Most people, however, just called him Dennis the Deadhead. Dennis took the bet, Sonny guessed Hopi—Dennis bought the first round.

After forty years of prospecting in the American Southwest, Sonny prided himself on guessing any Native American's tribe. He liked Indians. They were, in fact, the *only* people he liked.

"The Silver Spring is just a myth," Sonny said. "I should know, I looked for it twenty years ago and didn't find squat."

"Where'd you look?" Dennis asked.

"I looked in the Snake, Black, and San Francisco ranges." Sonny finished his beer and signaled the bartender for another. "I didn't find nuthin'."

"Well, you were close," Dennis said. He took a puff from the latest in his nonstop chain of Pall Malls. "It's in the Wah Wahs."

Dennis's wrinkled face hid under long, dirty-black hair. He wore a tie-dyed shirt, a fringed leather jacket covered with Grateful Dead skull patches, and

smelled awful. But then again, Sonny knew that his two straight weeks in the Arizona foothills had fixed him with a rather ripe stench as well.

"The legends are true, man," Dennis said. "That spring is bubbling out of the ground into a little pool full of silver dust."

"So you found the Silver Spring?" Sonny tried to sound disbelieving, but curiosity tickled his thoughts. "The legend is true, and it's just sittin' there waitin' for someone to claim it?"

"That's right, man. It's just layin' there as pretty as you please, as long as no one's found it since I was there about ten years ago."

"Right. And that's why you're here, at the Two-Spoke Bar, drinking rotgut vodka instead of livin' high on the hog at the Hilton."

"Hey, man, just 'cause I didn't take it don't mean it ain't there."

"Then why the hell didja leave it?" Sonny wasn't mad at Dennis, only at himself. The story was pure bullshit, yet already he felt that uncontrollable part of him embrace the tale the way a girl's legs wrap around her lover. Some men suffer addictions to drugs, booze, women, money; Sonny's habit was curiosity.

Dennis the Deadhead leaned forward conspiratorially, curling protectively around his drink, keeping his head low to the table. "That place is cursed, man. Maybe even evil."

"Aw, go fuck yourself! No curse ever stopped anyone from grabbin' the pot at the end of the rainbow. I'd lift the devil's sack and pluck treasure from his ass, if that's what it took."

"That's 'cause you ain't ever been there," Dennis said softly. "The Hopi know enough to steer clear of that place. No one goes out there. No reason to go there in the first place. Nothing there but dirt and rock. I went out there to see for myself, to test the legends, you might say, but I only went once. The devil lives on that mountain. You can *feel* him, man."

Throughout the conversation, Dennis's eyes had sparkled with friendly laughter. Especially when he talked of the summers of '79 through '84, during which he'd toured with the Dead. Now, however, Sonny noted that Dennis's friendly emotion filtered away like wisps of smoke from his Pall Mall. As he spoke of the Silver Spring and the mountains, his eyes filled with fear. Every few seconds, Dennis looked from one corner of the bar to the next, as if the simple mention of the legend might summon some evil power.

"So if you know where this place is, how come you haven't told anybody?"

Dennis shrugged. "No one ever asked. Most people take one look at me and shy away. I can't remember the last time someone introduced themselves and offered to buy me a drink. In fact, I think you're the first."

Sonny nodded. "Yeah, but a secret like that burns a hole in a man's belly. If no one has found it yet, you haven't really told anyone. Why me?"

Dennis stared at Sonny long and hard.

"I don't know," he said after a pause. His words were starting to slur slightly. "You're a man of the land. I can feel that. Maybe I told you because if you go there, I know you'll feel what I feel. Maybe because that place scares the shit out of me, and it won't scare you as much, maybe you can do something with it. Maybe it's because I'm getting drunk. Who knows?"

Dennis drained his vodka, his eyes flashing to both corners as he did.

"Could you draw me a map?" Sonny asked.

"Buy me another round of shots and I'll draw it right on this napkin," Dennis said. "But I warn ya. You won't like that place."

Sonny signaled the bartender again, this time with two fingers for a double shot.

Dennis produced a red Crayola, and on the beer-stained napkin he started drawing a map. Their conversation continued for another hour, during which the two of them got exceedingly drunk, but Sonny wasn't really paying attention anymore. All he could think about was the possibility that the fabled Silver Spring—where silver poured from the ground like water from a bottomless canteen—was real.

Sonny wasn't some greenhorn straight off the bus. He knew the Southwest like a man knows his wife's body. He could hop in his Humvee, drive five or six hours to Utah, then hike into the Wah Wah Mountains and locate Dennis the Deadhead's mythical Silver Spring. The trip might take a day, perhaps two considering hiking speed in the unforgiving Wah Wahs. That wasn't much wasted time, and he'd satisfy his curiosity. He *had* to check it out. An ounce of truth lined every old wives' tale, as his sainted mother used to tell him.

An ounce of truth sometimes paid off with an ounce of gold. Or in this case, an ounce of silver. Sonny wasn't going to be picky.

Chapter 2

Snow blew madly in a near-blinding wave, big wet clumps collecting on the windshield only to be swept away by the wipers. Wind drove at the night, the snow marking the wind's direction like tracer bullets. Connell leaned forward and squinted out the window. Visibility was only a few hundred feet. Rows of lights on either side of the winding driveway glowed with fuzzy halos of whipping snow.

"Maybe we should stay for a while, hon," Cori said. "The party is still going strong. Although I wonder how long it will last without Mr. Life of the Party there to charm everyone." Her hand reached out to touch his, which clung to the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip. He threw her a glance, offering her a reassuring smile.

"Oh, I'm sure they'll find a way to celebrate without me," Connell said, holding her hand for a moment. "Besides, I'd rather spend at least some of the first day of the new year with my wife, not a bunch of rowdy, drunken coworkers."

She smiled at him, that warm, melting smile that had caught his eye at a New Year's Eve party six years ago. Caught his eye and never let go. He grinned back.

"Don't worry, Pea," Connell said, returning the smile. "We'll be fine." The storm was getting worse, and he had no intention of spending the night at his boss's house, crashed out on the floor somewhere with passed-out coworkers scattered about like victims of some party land mine. This was New Year's Eve, after all, the anniversary of the night he'd met his wife. He would spend the night with her and her alone, in their bed.

Connell looked hard both to the left and to the right. He saw nothing through the almost solid swirl of snow. He pushed gently on the accelerator and eased the Lincoln out onto the road, tires crunching along the snow-covered driveway.

There was no squeal of brakes, no blaring horn, only the sudden smashing impact and the impossibly loud cries of screeching metal. The car lurched to the left, the back end swinging around on the wet, slushy pavement. The impact threw Connell against his seat belt so hard it cut off his breath. The Lincoln spun like a child's top, whipping almost a full 360 degrees as the back end flew into the ditch. Connell's head snapped back when the car crunched to a halt. As suddenly as it started, it ended, leaving complete silence except for the rapid clicking of ruined motors cooling in the night's grip.

Connell blinked, hands still clutching the steering wheel, trying to form a thought. A dull throb pulsed in his neck. A warm wetness and a sharp, stabbing pain rose up from his right knee. His mind finally centered on a single word: *accident*.

He turned to look at Cori. Faint light strayed from the lamps surrounding the driveway. The impact had devastated the passenger-side door, glass gone but for a few jagged shards, the once stately Lincoln now a mass of twisted metal, torn leather, and ripped fabric. The other car had smashed the door in so far that Cori was pushed almost to the middle of the seat. Snow blew in through the broken window, melting where it hit blood.

Her eyes were wide with shock and pain. Beautiful blond hair clung to her face, matted down with glistening red. Flecks of glass hung in her hair like glitter. Blood sheeted her scalp, her cheeks, her chin, falling to stain her white coat.

She looked at him, questioning terror written across her face. "Connell?" Something liquid and gurgling masked her smooth voice. She sounded weak, fractured.

Connell felt a stab of panic, a burst of blind rage. It didn't take a genius to see she would die if he didn't get help.

"Take it easy, Pea," Connell said, his voice loud and ragged with fear and adrenaline. He fumbled with his seat belt. His hands were slick with blood.

"Connell?" she asked again in her fragile voice. Her eyes looked glassy, unfocused. She weakly lifted a bloody hand toward him.

He took her hand, feeling the movement of tiny broken bones under her skin.

It was already too late, and he knew it. He felt tears welling up; he fought them back. He held her ravaged hand against his cheek.

"I'm here, Pea. I'm here."

Her head lolled forward. Connell heard voices shouting over the whipping wind. Faces appeared around the car; coworkers and concerned friends peered in, asking if he was okay. His eyes remained fixed on his dead wife. Snow swept in around them, soft and silent.

He held her hand against his cheek—her warmth faded away; her hand slowly grew as cold as a fresh fish dropped on ice.

Connell lurched up, a scream locked in his throat. He was freezing—not from the dream-snow, but from sweat-soaked sheets turned icy by air conditioning running full blast.

He tried to control his ragged breathing. He never knew when the dream would come. Sometimes he'd have it for weeks on end, every night a reenactment of the terror and the loss. Sometimes he'd go months between the dreams, and then he'd feel a strange guilt at the possibility of getting over his wife's death.

But he knew better. He'd never get over it.

He sat on the edge of the filthy bed, on sheets that hadn't been changed in months. As he stared out into the black mess of the room, he knew that the car crash had taken his life as well.

His pulse slowly returned to normal, and he steadied his breathing, fighting down the stabbing pain of losing her yet again. He looked at the clock—4:17 a.m. He'd overslept. He dragged himself out of bed. He had work to do.

Chapter 3

August 2

Sonny stared at the tiny spring bubbling forth from the mountainside. It spilled cold water onto cracked rocks heated by the blistering Utah sun. Sonny's huge smile split his deep-black skin, revealing too-white false teeth.

Sometimes you just get lucky, Sonny thought. You spend your life hunting for gold and silver and a dozen other things, following up on leads, rumors, hunches, and myths and usually you get squat. For every valuable find discovered from such dream chasing, there were twenty or thirty hunts that turned up nothing but dirt. After a fruitless summer with nothing to show but blisters and a few new aches and pains; a summer spent researching dead and lost mines; a summer spent buried in libraries, city halls, university museums; a summer spent digging worthless dirt under the same sun in four different states; he stood there looking at the results of good old-fashioned dumb luck.

Dennis's map had proved amazingly accurate considering it was based on a ten-year-old memory. Those Hopis sure knew their land. The water spilled out of the rock, trickling slowly into an ages-old streambed.

Water was scarce in these parts, always had been, which should have made even a tiny spring like this a known landmark. But no one came here. He reached down to his belt and rubbed the Hopi Indian charm he'd bought specifically for this trip.

On his belt, opposite the Indian charm, hung his lucky pie tin. Tied to a short rope, it swayed from his belt like a six-shooter dangling from an outlaw's hip. He scooped up some silt, then swished it around in the tin, the motion carrying the fine silt over the edge to splash against the mountainside. After two minutes of panning, all that remained was a fine, white, metallic dust.

A whoop escaped his lips, a yell of joy that bounced off the mountain and into the dry summer air. He'd found it. Sonny pulled a small vial from his pocket, poured in the watery dust and sealed it tight. He carefully placed the vial in his chest pocket and buttoned it shut, giving it a proud little pat before covering up his tracks and any evidence of his visit. It had taken him six grueling hours of

climbing and hiking to reach the spot, and the same return trip stood between him and his Humvee. After that, it was three miles worth of rough travel to reach anything resembling a road.

Sonny had found silver a couple of times in his career. The spring didn't contain enough dust to cover a summer's worth of prospecting, but that wasn't the way things worked anymore. Nowadays you made much more money finding the stuff and then selling the location to big companies. Let some mining corporation suck the minerals from the ground. Sonny, meanwhile, would spend the winter in Rio with some bronzed little piece of fluff a third his age bringing him drinks and keeping him warm at night.

Sonny was exultant. The chance encounter in an out-of-the-way bar and a small gesture of friendliness had combined to produce this find. Dennis's amazing story was grade-A, one-hundred-percent true.

While the find elated him, Sonny couldn't shake memories of Dennis's fearful, scanning eyes. That fear made Sonny nervous—because he *felt* something on that mountain, just as Dennis said he would. Sonny found himself hurrying down the slope faster than normal.

The Indians were so scared of the place they wouldn't even walk on this mountain, let alone approach the spring. He'd asked around, visiting all the Indians he knew in the area. Even the kids and the half-breeds, the ones who put little or no stock in the old faith, didn't come here. There was nothing but rocks, sand, and tough, scraggly trees—and the nearest town, Milford, was an hour away—but it still gave him the creepy-crawlies. As far as Sonny could divine, Dennis the Deadhead was the only Indian to visit this spot in at least a decade.

Sonny knew why. Most Indians, even the half-breeds, had an affinity for what the land had to say. After forty years in the desert, Sonny had that same affinity—and this place didn't have anything nice to say at all. This place spooked him in some intangible, eerie way. The rocks held a feeling that wasn't right, wasn't natural. Sonny wouldn't go so far as to call it a feeling of evil, but it sure as hell didn't make him warm and fuzzy inside. He'd never felt anything like it. It wasn't just the mountain, but what was on it.

Or rather, what *wasn't* on it.

There were no animals here. The Utah mountains teem with life if you know what to look for. Here, however, there was nothing; no birds flying overhead, no jackrabbit tracks, no rodents, no chewed branches or seed husks, no droppings of any kind. The place was *still*. Quiet. Uncomfortable.

After several hours of that creepy feeling tingling up his back, Sonny finally nailed down the vibe. It was the same dark, thick atmosphere that clings to a funeral. He understood why the Indians called the place cursed. He also understood why Dennis the Deadhead left it alone despite the obvious riches to be had. It didn't matter. He'd mapped the location extremely well and could give exact coordinates to the spring. He wouldn't have to come here again.

As darkness fell, Sonny finished up the long hike to the Humvee. He took a thirsty look at the blazing sunset, a picture that grew more and more beautiful as the years wore on. As he climbed into the Humvee, he felt a sense of relief that the mountain would soon be behind him. He patted his chest pocket one more time to

make sure the vial was there. His leathery face split by a wide smile, Sonny headed for Salt Lake City.

Chapter 4

August 3

Salt Lake City looked so damn beautiful, a jewel against the breathtaking backdrop of the Wasatch Mountains. The view was heavenly—it was no wonder Brigham Young stopped his caravan some one hundred and fifty years ago and decided that this was the place for the Mormons to stake their claim.

The staking of claims was a big part of Utah's history, whether it was for land or minerals. Utah sucked untold fortunes from the earth: gold, iron ore, molybdenum, potash, magnesium. In the 1990s the state led the nation in beryllium and Gilsonite production. But as far back as Sonny could remember, platinum claims were not among Utah's fabled stories.

"Platinum?" Sonny asked, his face wrinkling incredulously under his now neatly trimmed beard. "You sure, Herb? I thought it was silver."

"Yes, I'm sure, Sonny," Herbert Darker said in a conspiratorial whisper. Herbert was one of the few men that Sonny could look down at. Herbert stood all of five-foot-five, just a hair under Sonny's diminutive stature. They sat on opposite sides of a black lab table, the sample result printout lying between them. Herbert's eyes revealed his excitement over the find.

"It looks like a very rich source," Herbert said. "The stuff you found is almost pure. That's unheard of. And one of the impurities is iridium, which is also valuable. This is an *amazing* find."

Sonny found himself whispering as well. "Are you telling me this is my biggest find yet? Bigger than the Jorgensson mine?"

"Well, it's the biggest find *I've* analyzed for you, anyway."

"Oh shut up, Herb," Sonny said jokingly. "You know damn well you're the only one I let touch my samples for going on, what, fifteen years now?"

Herbert looked away for a second—away and *down*. Then just as quickly, he looked up, looked Sonny in the eye, and smiled. "Sixteen years, actually," Herbert said. "I'm not an expert on platinum, but from what I've read—" his voice dropped to a breathless whisper, and Sonny strained to hear "—you may have the purest vein in the *world*."

Thirty minutes later, Herbert Darker sat in the privacy of his locked office, a stunning view of sunset over the Wasatch Mountains filling the room with amber light. He spoke into the phone, still whispering despite the fact that Sonny had left twenty minutes earlier.

"I'm telling you, Mr. Kirkland, this is big," Herbert said, his hand cupped over the mouthpiece.

"Just tell me the ore grade, Herbert?" Connell said.

"I don't know. He didn't bring in an ore sample, just the dust he panned. For there to be that much dust and have it be that pure, it would have to come from a very concentrated source. There's no impurities, except for about thirty percent iridium, but that's almost as valuable as the platinum. If I had to guess, I'd say at least ten ounces per ton of ore, maybe higher."

"Bullshit, Herbert. There's no platinum vein that high." The sound of Connell's cold tone always made Herbert nervous. He hated talking to the man, but Connell always paid so well.

"You think I don't know that?" Herbert said. "Why do you think I called you so quickly?" Tension gripped his body. Stress guided his every movement, making him fidget in his chair. His temples throbbed, as did the back of his neck. He knew he shouldn't have called Connell, but now it was too late.

He'd met Connell only once, mostly because the man rarely left his office, ruling the mining industry like some dark magician from his tower of doom. Connell was tall and lanky, just a hair over six-foot-four. His carriage gave off predatorial waves. He moved quickly, with a slight limp but little wasted motion, his black curly hair framing remorseless gray eyes.

"Okay," Connell said. "Where did he get it?"

"Hell if I know. He's a crafty old bastard."

"How can you not know, Herbert? It's got to be in the area, right? I mean you're in Salt Lake City, and he came to you."

Herbert took a breath. The pain in his temples throbbed in time with his heartbeat. "He always comes to me. He does it so no one can guess the location of his finds."

A little more than a year earlier Sonny had discovered gold in Wyoming. The prospector carried the sample all the way to Salt Lake City, all the way to Darker, Inc., for analysis. *The word is 'trust,'* Herbert thought. *You're the only one he trusts, the only one. Now you're betraying that trust.*

Connell's flat, no-nonsense voice grabbed Herbert's attention. "I need to talk to this man immediately. Give me his name and number."

"I can't do that!" Herbert heard himself whining, but he couldn't help it. "You have to wait. He's only been in town for a couple of days. He only found out about the platinum quality thirty minutes ago, for Christ's sake. He'd know I gave you the information!"

"You're a piece of work, you know that? You don't have any idea where he got it, it may be the richest find of the century, and now you're telling me I shouldn't call him?"

"But Mr. Kirkland, he'll know it was me! I could go to jail if he wanted to press charges."

"Oh don't be an idiot," Connell said. "He couldn't prove anything, and there is nothing connecting you with us. I haven't got time for this bullshit. I need his number, and I need it now. Would an extra ten grand change your mind?"

Herbert fell silent. He could still back out and protect Sonny's find, at least for a while. Perhaps give Sonny time to properly sell the claim; Connell was ruthless and would find a way to own the site within days. Sonny might very well wind up with nothing.

"Okay, Herbert, you're playing hardball. My courier will deliver twenty-five grand to your hot little hands the moment I have a chat with this man. This is a one-time offer. I need a decision right now."

Herbert's head throbbed. So much money in one shot, but only if he served up Sonny on a plate. Connell didn't make idle threats; it was now or nothing.

"Well, thanks for wasting my time," Connell said. "I'll get my information elsewhere."

"Wait!" Herbert said, hearing how loud he sounded in his quiet office. "I'll give it to you." Herbert gave Connell the number. Even as he did it, he knew he was doing something wrong, but Connell would just find another way to get the information. Wrong or right, Herbert had already given up the goods on Sonny McGuinness. To not get anything out of that mistake was just plain bad business.

"You're a smart man, Herbert," Connell said. "A very smart man. I also need any information you can give me on Sonny himself. What other sites has he discovered, and what companies does he usually work with?"

Herbert's jaw opened in astonishment. Connell had never asked for such details before.

"I... I can't tell you that."

"I want that information and I want it now, Herbert," Connell said in a cold, detached voice. "Give me all the information you have on Sonny McGuinness. I'll double my offer. Fifty thousand dollars."

"But that information isn't part of the deal. The deal is I come across info on any big finds and I call you. That's it."

"The deal's changed," Connell said. "You'll give me all the info right now, or you're out of the stable. No more payoffs."

Herbert felt his face growing red with anger. "You... you wouldn't do that! I've given you great information!"

"Don't be stupid, Herbert. You think you're the only one on the payroll? You think I do this shit for my health? I have a system, a system that gives me major finds, and if you're not part of that system, then you're out of that system."

Herbert paused, then clenched his teeth. His head felt hot. He knew he'd bitten off way more than he could chew this time. "I think I'll take my twenty-five thousand and call it finished, Mr. Kirkland."

This time it was Connell's turn to pause.

"It's a one-time offer," he said finally. "When you're out, you're out for good. I want that information."

"I gave you his number."

"I won't forget this, Herbert."

Herbert swallowed and wiped sweat from his forehead. "I know that, Mr. Kirkland."

Herbert hung up the phone, then dropped his face into his hands. Guilt perched on Herbert's conscience like a buzzard on a coyote's carcass. He'd sold Sonny out. Just like that. And to Connell Kirkland, no less. Connell was not a nice person, to put it lightly, and he would stop at nothing to possess this find. In mining circles Connell's nickname was "Cutthroat."

Connell wanted this one, wanted it bad. Sonny was in deep shit. And Herbert knew he was the one to blame.

Connell's fingers drummed the desktop, *ba-da-ba-bump, ba-da-ba-bump*.

He hated Herbert Darker. He hated any whiner, and Herbert was a whiner of the highest degree. Business was business, and if you had to sell someone out to make money that's what you did. But you didn't whine about it, you didn't try to rationalize it, try to justify it in order to assuage your guilt.

Connell had dozens of agents performing the same task as Herbert Darker. He referred to the numerous informants as his "stable," as if he were a pimp and the spies his whores. He'd created the network four years ago with only three people, two in America and one in South Africa. The system was illegal but profitable, and he'd gradually added to the roster. Now his stable encompassed twenty-seven geologists and environmental analysts from across the globe, all of whom knew that any potential find they reported to Connell would earn them a quick five grand.

Those calls usually amounted to nothing. Sometimes they were outright bullshit, people trying to scam him. The one thing—the *only* thing—he liked about Herbert Darker was that the man never tried to run a scam.

Herbert never called with low-grade sites, never called with finds that amounted to nothing, and never, *ever* called with erroneous data. Each time Connell took a call from Herbert, it merited special attention. Herbert triple-checked every sample, and on top of that often researched the site himself before calling.

This time, however, Herbert had called after only one test, and less than three hours after completing it. Very amateurish. Or at least it would be from anyone else. It meant Herbert had almost pissed himself from excitement. Ten ounces of platinum per ton of ore would do that to a fella.

If the numbers held true, the find would be by far the richest vein ever discovered. Connell smiled at Herbert's petty greed. The man risked jail and the destruction of his business for a lousy twenty-five grand when the platinum vein's worth might measure in the hundred-million range.

Connell paced his office, staring out his window on the fifty-sixth floor of the Renaissance Center building. It was dank and drizzly above the Detroit River, thick clouds blotting out the stars. His cheap suit itched. He ignored the distraction. He could afford far better clothing, better even than the custom-tailored affairs sported by EarthCore's other executives. Hell, by now he could probably afford almost anything, although he hadn't checked his bank statement in over two years. Connell had more important things to do with his time than spend it worrying about appearances.

He felt anxious. If this find was even half as big as Herbert Darker estimated, it would be one of the richest sites on the face of the planet. It would definitely be EarthCore's biggest asset. A sense of urgency filled him—any rival company that discovered the site would move fast to buy or lease the property. At the moment, Connell held the edge. He had to get to Sonny McGuinness and he had to get to him fast.

First, however, he had to inform the boss.

"Come in, sweetie," Barbara Yakely said through thick cigar smoke as Connell entered her massive office. The office, and everything in it, had once

belonged to Barbara's husband, Charles Yakely Jr. Since the plane crash that killed Charles Jr. and her son—Charles III—just over a decade ago, EarthCore and the big office belonged to her.

She gave Connell a warm smile. He was her favorite. Most thought that Connell had garnered her favor with his penchant for big-dollar digs, but it went much deeper than money and profit. They shared the unspoken void of true love lost to sudden, heart-ripping tragedy. She'd watched him change from a gregarious, wide-smiled person into a hard-faced, hard-hearted man. Once upon a time he'd been a familiar face to almost everyone in the company. In the last four years, however, he'd become nothing more than a voice on the phone to most employees, a voice of pure efficiency and power.

Efficiency was the key word, she reminded herself. Efficiency, and profitability.

"This better be important, sweetie," Barbara said, her gravely voice holding a note of impatience.

"It's important." Connell's features were expressionless, but then they always were. "We have a lead on something that could be big."

"How big?"

"How familiar are you with the platinum market?"

Barbara shrugged. EarthCore had no platinum interests, and as such she didn't concern herself with the subject.

"Prices have risen steadily for the last five years," Connell said. "Ford introduced a new catalytic converter two years ago and hailed it as the next generation of pollution control. Their converters, each of which requires two ounces of platinum, are a revolutionary step in automobile pollution control. The system not only reduces pollution, but the air that leaves the car is cleaner than the air that goes in. No more pollution. No more smog. The end of the electric-car threat. The oil companies are nuts over the technology."

Barbara nodded. Ford's pollution-free cars sold faster than cigars at a Castro convention. The Lucid, the first model to come standard with the new converter, was last year's best-selling model.

"Every car maker in the industry is striving to duplicate the process," Connell said. "Mercedes-Benz, Toyota, and Chevrolet are all releasing new models with the same technology. In two years, every new gas-powered car will have this feature—that's two ounces of platinum for each vehicle."

"And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Some estimate that twenty percent of goods manufactured today either contain platinum or are produced by equipment that contains platinum. It's in all types of things from eyeglasses to jet engines to medical equipment to crude-oil refining machinery. Industry uses the stuff for its conductivity, resistance to corrosion and high temperature resistance. In addition, it's the metal du jour of the computer industry. Use of platinum in computers has increased at least a thousand percent every year since 1994, a span of growth unprecedented since the introduction of silicon."

"Unlike silicon, however, platinum isn't cheap. With the continued computer industry push and its increased use in the auto industry, the demand is through the roof."

Barbara suppressed a smile of maternal pride. She wondered if there was *any* informational tidbit about the mining industry her Connell hadn't memorized.

He continued. "On top of the increased demand, there's a possible supply shortage coming soon. South Africa and Russia are the main producers of platinum ore. There are only two substantial platinum sources in America—Stillwater Mine in Montana and the Weaver Creek mine in Arizona. Unlike gold, which many banks stockpile to sell when prices rise, the only known platinum reserves are in the Russian states. They dumped most of it in the late nineties, and most analysts think the Russian reserves are practically gone. What this means is that the demand for platinum is soaring while supply is still in the ground. The price is currently stable at 850 dollars an ounce. South Africa controls the majority of supply, and they'll ration production to drive up the price. My research leads me to believe that the price will shoot above 925 dollars an ounce by this time next year, and should continue to rise."

Barbara rolled the cigar in her fingers. She knew from experience that Connell's business instincts bordered on the uncanny; if he smelled a profit, that was good enough for her.

"Ore grade for platinum is usually very low, in the range of one ounce platinum per ten tons ore. The Weaver Creek site surprised the world's mining community with one ounce per six tons of ore. Above that, Stillwater mine in Oklahoma makes unproven claims of eight-tenths of an ounce per single ton of ore." Connell leaned forward, gripping the edge of her desk.

"We may be on to a site that possesses a vastly higher grade. In fact, we may be onto the richest platinum vein in history. I'm leaving tonight for Salt Lake City to talk to the prospector who discovered this site. I need to buy him now before a bidding war erupts. I want to use Kayla Meyers."

At the mention of that name, Barbara's smile faded.

"We discussed this, Connell. You agreed we weren't going to use her anymore."

Connell nodded. "That was then, this is now. I don't know if the prospector will play ball or not."

"So throw a gob of money at him," Barbara said. "If your hunch is that strong, take a chance. I'll authorize a million."

Connell shrugged. "Don't know if that will be enough, Barbara. I figure we've only got one chance to get the location, and we have to get it now. If the prospector even has an inkling of how valuable this find may be, he won't even blink at a million. If I throw more money his way and he's smart, he'll contact every mining company in the world and negotiate a bigger deal."

"So what? Last time I checked, we were a very profitable company. We don't need Meyers—we can match any deal."

Connell nodded again. "True, but negotiations take time. You and I both know that with today's technology, one of the other companies may discover his site before we can close a deal. On top of that, if he starts making noise about a platinum find, the South Africans could get involved, so could the Russians, even the U.S. government. I want to keep this very, very quiet. I need to close the deal with the prospector *immediately*, before word gets out. In order to do that, I need to know everything about this man, and I need to know *now*. I have to hit the negotiation table fully armed."

Barbara shook her head. "Look, Connell, that woman is bad news. She put that Crittenden Mines employee in a *wheelchair*."

"She was acquitted."

"Of the criminal charge, but we're still holding the bag on the civil suit. I'm still trying to negotiate a decent settlement. Or have you forgot we're on the hook for \$10 million in damages?"

"I haven't forgot the lawsuit, but don't forget the copper mine in Moyobamba, and the bauxite site in Queensland. How are those doing?"

Barbara grimaced. She hated it when Connell played the smart-ass. Both of the mines were huge profit centers for EarthCore.

"You know damn well how they're doing," she said.

"And we wouldn't have those sites if I hadn't used Kayla Meyers. And what about O'Doyle? Remember the security problems we had before Kayla told me about him?"

Barbara nodded.

"She's the best there is," Connell said. "I need information and I need it pronto. She's the only one who can deliver."

"I don't care about all that, she's bad news. She was kicked out of the NSA, for crying out loud, Connell. We got our money's worth out of her, but we're not using her again."

"But Barbara, this could be the richest find in history—"

"No! And that's *final*," she said, pounding her fist on the desk. "You'll have to close the deal without her. I'll call accounting, set up two million for you to close this deal, but we're not using Meyers. Understand?"

Connell sighed and looked away, but nodded.

He walked out of the room. Barbara smiled and took a big puff of the cigar. So he'd stumbled onto the richest platinum vein in history, eh? Knowing Connell as she did, she wasn't the least bit surprised. She had faith in him—he could close the deal without using that psycho Meyers.

That woman was downright scary.

Chapter 5

August 4

At 2:15 a.m. and back in his office, Connell worked the phone yet again. A sleepy voice answered the other end of the line after seventeen rings. Sleepy, but clearly irritated.

Kayla's voice was too deep to belong to a woman, yet still somehow sounded feminine despite the torrent of obscenities it usually carried.

"This had better be damn good," she said.

"This is Kirkland."

"Mr. Kirkland?" Respect was suddenly audible in her voice. Or maybe it was just greed. "I'm surprised to hear from you. How can I help you?"

"I need dirt on a man and I need it now," Connell said. "The name is Sonny McGuinness. He's a prospector. Right now he's at the Salt Lake City Hilton." He heard Kayla scribbling furiously.

"Permanent address or phone?"

"Don't know. He operates out of Salt Lake City and vacations in Rio. That's all I know."

"What else?"

"I said that's all I know."

"You've got to be shitting me."

"I shit you not, Ms. Meyers."

Kayla's tone of respect gave way to one of annoyance. "Mr. Kirkland, that's not much to go on."

"He has his samples analyzed at Darker Inc., a Salt Lake City company run by a man named Herbert Darker. Darker may be your best source for leads."

"You know the Darker guy?"

"Yes, he's in the stable." Connell often gave Kayla information that he gave to no one else in the world, not even Barbara Yakely. Kayla was efficient, quiet, and trustworthy, although Connell was sure that would last only as long as he remained her top-paying client. She was a worthwhile investment; ex-National Security Agency operatives were tough to come by.

"Darker is on the payroll, so he'll cooperate?"

Connell thought on that for a moment. Herbert's illusion of morality might cause delays, and Connell didn't have time for delays.

"Correction. He *was* in the stable," Connell said. "Do what you have to do, but get me that information. Just try and keep it under control this time, will you? No more putting people in wheelchairs."

"I understand," Kayla said. He could hear the smile in her voice. He wondered what Herbert was in for, then decided he really didn't care. Darker had made his bed, now he'd have to sleep in it.

Better him than me, Connell thought. Dealing with Kayla Meyers seemed like dealing with the devil; sooner or later the tables would turn and you'd be on the receiving end of something painful and nasty. He wasn't afraid of her, but only because one has to give a damn about living to be afraid of death. None of that mattered—he really didn't care to know how she obtained the dirt on Sonny McGuiness, as long as she got it.

"I need this by tomorrow," Connell said.

"Oh go fuck yourself, Kirkland! You can't ask for that and you know it. I'm in Washington, for fuck's sake. I have to do a computer search first and then probably fly to Salt Lake City. It's not going to happen."

"Kayla, this pays triple your usual fee. That's if I have something useful by 8:15 p.m. tomorrow. No excuses. Understand?"

Her normal \$15,000 fee suddenly turned into a rush-order \$45,000.

"Sure, Mr. Kirkland," Kayla said, her voice tired but resigned. "I understand. 8:15 p.m. tomorrow."

Connell hung up without another word. He knew she'd find something, he just hoped it would be enough. He had to *own* McGuiness. Not only own him, he reminded himself, but make him part of the project. According to Herbert, Sonny knew the area's mining history better than any man alive. Such knowledge was vital to make things move quickly. Time was Connell's biggest enemy. Sooner or

later word of the find would leak to the competition, but by then Connell intended to have the site locked up tight.

At 4:47 a.m., Kayla stared at the computer screen with bloodshot eyes. A recent DMV photo of Sonny McGuinness smiled back at her with his blazing white teeth and a beard that seemed electric against his pitch-black skin.

You're a real pain in the ass, Sonny-boy.

It had taken her well over an hour to dig up information on Sonny, which was twice her normal search time. She had, however, finally tracked down his Social Security number. That little tidbit of information opened up countless doors: credit ratings, Department of Motor Vehicle lists, tax info, etc.

His DMV history showed he currently owned an '07 Humvee, a '99 Grand Cherokee and an antique '79 Corvette. A cross-reference to his credit rating showed all three vehicles were paid off.

She again cross-referenced his credit rating to find mortgage information. One residence: a seven-hundred thousand dollar home in Reno.

Looks like a bum, lives like a king.

With a few keystrokes, she back-hacked from his credit report into his bank account. Interestingly enough, he showed only thirteen grand to his name. She'd have expected more from a man with such expensive tastes.

How about tax evasion?

She calling up his IRS records. Her eyes widened slightly as she pieced together his tax history over the last thirty years. IRS files showed his income from 1970 through 2002 at over seven million dollars. She ran a tax-fraud sniffer program created by the NSA, and it came up blank. The man was honest, at least when it came to taxes.

His exemptions and records painted a rather detailed picture of his life. For one thing, Sonny McGuinness appeared to be quite the philanthropist. Over the years he'd given \$100,000 to both the United Negro College Fund and the Wildlife Fund, \$200,000 dollars to the Paralyzed Veterans of America and over \$300,000 to Brigham Young University's archeology department.

Kayla's anger grew. She checked her watch—5:12 a.m. She was running out of time. She had booked a 6:45 a.m. flight to Salt Lake City, and she didn't want to head out there completely empty-handed.

While Sonny's financial picture was notable, it didn't give Connell anything to work with. Connell needed blackmail information, not a report on Saint Sonny. She abandoned the financial strategy, instead setting the tax-sniffer program to hunt up information on Herbert Darker. Leaving that routine to run in the background, she moved on to see if Sonny had a criminal record. A quick scan of all national and state police databases turned up quite a list.

Bingo. Hopefully this would be what Connell needed. Her heart leapt when she saw a felony conviction, but it sank again as she noted the year. The old prospector had served a two-year stint in Ryker's for assault and battery, but that was in '75 and '76, almost thirty years ago.

She continued to fume as she read through the other seven entries on his rap sheet—all arrests for solicitation of prostitutes. For a man who listed his legal residence in Reno, Nevada, she didn't think a patronage of the world's oldest profession would provide adequate blackmail material.

Slow rage rose in her chest, a warm feeling that spread through her body. Sonny was clean, no information worth Connell's time.

The computer beeped, indicating it had finished searching Herbert Darker's file. She immediately called it up and read through the long list of tax information. Her anger subsided as her smile widened.

8:23 a.m. (10:23 EDT)

"Honey, hurry up or I'm going to be late," Herbert said. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking into the kitchen. His wife Angie busily stuffed matching Tupperware containers into a cloth lunch bag. Herbert's company had grossed almost a million dollars that fiscal year, but he still couldn't bring himself to buy lunch. After ten years of struggling to build his own business, the frugal habits established in the early days were impossible to break.

A high-pitched scream of attack ripped through the house; Herbert braced himself as his son launched off the third-to-last stair and landed on Herbert's back. Herbert let out a small whuff and stumbled forward. Luke was getting bigger and stronger every day; pretty soon the daily Attack from the Stairs would send Herbert sprawling across the entryway's Spanish tile floor.

"Take it easy, Luke," Herbert said with a small laugh. "You're going to kill your dad one of these days."

Luke squeezed Herbert's shoulders tightly. "I wouldn't kill you, Daddy, I love you."

Herbert smiled and lowered his oldest son to the ground. Angie hurried over with the cloth lunch sack in her left hand and his youngest son, Mark, clutched awkwardly in her right arm. Mark was also getting big-soon he'd probably be joining his brother in the kamikaze stair attacks.

"Thanks honey," Herbert said, giving her a kiss, then planting a kiss on Mark's forehead.

The phone rang just as Herbert walked out the door. He stopped automatically as Angie answered it. She held it toward him. He checked his watch, sighed, then grabbed the phone while Luke laughed and climbed the stairs for another attack.

"Hello?"

"Hiya, Herbert," crooned a woman's sultry voice. "On your way to work?"

"Yes, I am, and I'm going to be late. Can I help you?"

"I sure hope so," the woman said. "I need to meet with you. Immediately."

"Who is this?"

"I've got some tax information you might be interested in."

Herbert froze. "Excuse me?"

"I know about your taxes, Herbie. I know everything. I assume you want to talk to me in private, but I can be at your house in five minutes, if you like. I'm sure your wife would love to hear what I've got to say."

Herbert felt a combined wash of rage and terror. "Did Kirkland send you?"

"Does it really matter?"

Herbert's heart raced with fear of discovery. Angie looked at him quizzically. "No, no that's quite all right," he said into the phone. "Where did you have in mind?"

"Pioneer Park. You know where it is?"

"Yes, I know."

"Ten minutes. I'm Ms. Smith. Look for the gray van."

The phone clicked as the woman disconnected. Herbert slowly set the phone down, fear dripping into his soul.

8:35 a.m.

The shrill ringing of the phone brought Sonny out of his semiconscious state. While his body remained exhausted from a night of amorous adventure with the exquisitely talented Chloe, his mind popped instantly alert, ready for the day.

"Yes?"

"Mr. McGuinness?"

"Who is this?" Sonny said, instantly suspicious. He'd told only one person—Herbert Darker—where he was staying.

"Mr. McGuinness, my name is Connell Kirkland. I represent a company that would like to talk to you about your find."

Connell "Cutthroat" Kirkland of EarthCore. Anybody who knew anything about the mining world knew that name. Kirkland's rep preceded him; he was a man not to be trifled with.

"I'm flying into town and I hoped we could meet for dinner," Connell said.

Sonny felt anger well up inside him like a rocket warming up for launch. The only find he'd had in over two months was the Wah Wah site, and he'd only discovered that two days earlier. Only Herbert Darker knew about that find. Had Herbert sold him out? Sonny's first urge was to hang up, but he needed to know the extent of the possible betrayal. He also needed to know what information this Kirkland character held. Besides, EarthCore had deep pockets. Whatever Kirkland offered, it would probably prove a good starting-off point for open negotiations with other companies.

"Augustino's," Sonny said. "Make the reservations for eight p.m. Ask for Sonny McGuinness's table. Don't be late." He started to get up, preparing to go out to Darker's and find out what the hell was up. As he rose, a hand with long fingernails lightly scraped his back. He turned to see Chloe smiling up at him, her caramel skin beautiful against the white sheets, her lush lips slightly parted, her black eyes glinting with sex.

Sonny's anger dissipated, replaced by morning lust. He had all day, after all—Herbert wasn't going anywhere.

8:41 a.m.

Kayla sat and waited. She'd parked the gray, nondescript rental van under a struggling elm tree just outside a typical suburban park. She checked her makeup in the van's rearview mirror. She still looked damn good, if she did say so herself, even though the only sleep she'd had was a brief catnap on the flight out from D.C. The bags under her eyes showed through the makeup, but only slightly.

Sonny McGuinness might have nothing to hide, but Herbert Darker had a closet full of financial skeletons. He'd pulled in \$210,000 from Connell, one rat-out at a time. If the IRS found out about that unreported sum, Herbert would be looking at

a decade in prison at least. If she was going to come up with something on McGuiness, she'd have to fabricate it. Darker was the only person who could help on such short notice.

Herbert pulled up to the curb in his Cadillac. As he got out, Kayla evaluated him; five-foot-five, maybe one hundred and fifty pounds, all the muscle of a Dachau victim. No visible weapons, poor coordination. An easy mark.

She opened the van's sliding side door and stepped out. The three-inch heels on her black pumps slid into the grass, but only a little. She saw Herbert's eyes widen. She couldn't blame him, as she'd dressed to elicit just such a reaction. Her loose cotton skirt barely hung below her ass, showing off strong legs. The pumps only added to her five-foot, ten-inch frame. Her long, straight blond hair draped loosely around her face and shoulders, framing emerald eyes and a sultry smile. A halter top showed plenty of deeply bronzed skin as well as toned arms, shoulders, and a smooth six-pack of abs. She flashed Herbert a practiced smile and waved him forward. She saw his guard instantly drop. He was still angry, but like a typical man, most of his fear subsided when he laid eyes on a sexy woman. He was a man, after all. And men weren't afraid of beautiful women.

He eyed her with a suspicious glare. "I have a message for Kirkland. You tell that asshole he crossed the line when you called my *home*."

Kayla flashed a look across the park. The only kids present were at least fifty yards away, occupied with the sandbox, paying no attention to the van or the adults beside it. Kayla still smiled at Herbert, then reached back into the van. She pulled out a Taser. Herbert's eyes widened slightly, but before he had time to run or call out in surprise, ten thousand volts coursed through his body. Kayla watched Herbert's body shudder and jerk from the electricity.

She cut the power and he fell forward. With practiced ease, she caught him on the way down and flipped his short, light body over her shoulder. She effortlessly tossed him into the van. Jumping in after him and slamming the door, she quickly rolled him on his stomach, then tied his hands and feet behind his back with thin copper wire. Herbert moaned softly, incoherently, as Kayla buckled a ball-gag's leather straps around the back of his head.

She slid into the driver's seat and gunned the engine, smoothly pulling out of the park and down the street. The kids never looked up from their summer play. Someone in the neighborhood might have seen, but Kayla wouldn't keep ol' Herb long. She zipped through the songs on her iPod—Cindi Lauper would do nicely for the drive. Kayla tapped the steering wheel in time to "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun."

Herbert regained consciousness and started mumbling. The words seemed incomprehensible through the ball-gag, but Kayla had done this before—she had heard such words more times than she could remember.

"You want to know where I'm taking you, sunshine?" Kayla asked, flashing a seductive smile over her shoulder. "Somewhere we can be alone. Gotta ask you a few questions."

Fear flashed on Herbert's face. Fear and incredulousness. Just like a man—take away control of any situation, and they crumble like little boys.

While she didn't know Salt Lake City, she'd scouted the area before setting up the meeting with Herbie. A vacant factory sat less than two minute's drive from the park. She pulled into the empty, weed-choked parking lot and drove behind the

building, out of sight from the main road. It wasn't a great hiding place, but she only planned on a fifteen-minute encounter.

She killed the engine. It was time to get to work. Cindy Lauper wouldn't do, she need some theme music, something a little more... rocking. She thumbed the iPod's click-wheel until the display read "The Donnas—Take Me to the Backseat."

Kayla grabbed her purse and slid around to Herbert. He lay on his stomach, his hands and feet bound behind him. A little blood trickled from his left wrist where the wire had cut into the skin.

"You and I are going to have a little conversation," Kayla said, kneeling down in front of Herbert and tenderly stroking his hair. "I need to get some information from you. If you're good, I'll let you go. If you're not, I'll kill you."

Herbert's eyes went wide with fear. He tried to say something, but the red ball of the gag blocked all words. Kayla slid around behind him and straddled his back, resting her crotch on Herbert's small ass.

From her purse she pulled a pair of rust-speckled pliers. She could, of course, afford to buy new pliers, but these had sentimental value. Back when the NSA still looked upon her as a fair-haired child, she'd put the pliers to good use in Honduras, Kuwait, Paris, Afghanistan, and even in D.C. They were supposedly one of the reasons behind her dismissal. The truth, however, was that the "men" in the NSA's positions of power viewed her as a threat. André Vogel, the NSA director, had sacrificed her for political gain, made her a scapegoat in order to advance his career. "Made an example" of her, he'd said. Vogel simply found a way to get rid of her because her continued success and unfailing patriotism undermined his control—if it hadn't been for "excessive force," he would have created some other fabrication. She'd loved the NSA, made it her life. And now she put the pliers to use in the private sector, for neither God nor Country, but only for money. It was so unfair, so empty.

But a girl still had to pay the bills.

She knew the pliers, knew every nook and cranny, every rust spot, every scratch. The engraved words kmart drop forged (japan) showed on the handle. The tip was good for things like ripping lips off of faces and pulling tongues from throats.

The pliers' best feature, in her expert opinion, were the four pointed "teeth" just behind the tip. They were designed to let you get at nuts and bolts, give you a good grip on such things. They also happened to fit nicely around fingers.

Around knuckles, to be precise.

She slid the cool pliers around Herbert's knuckle, where the pinkie met the hand. Without a word, she squeezed with practiced strength. A loud crunching sound ripped through the van, like a tree branch breaking under the weight of wet snow. Herbert threw his head back and screamed.

His thrashing sent a tingling jolt through her body. Her skin felt electric, so sensitive she could feel her skirt sliding across her thighs.

Herbert pulled at his restraints, but the wire only dug further into his skin. He stopped fighting and stayed still, but kept screaming. His body trembled with fear—Kayla's breathing came in short, shallow pants. She could feel the blood coursing through her body.

Kayla stroked his hair. He sounded loud, but she knew from experience that such screams were practically inaudible outside the van. He started crying, still trying to mumble through the ball-gag. She recognized these words as well.

"Why?" Kayla said, echoing his question as she slid the pliers up to the second pinkie knuckle. "I'll tell you soon enough, sweet thing."

With a snarling smile and a sigh of passion she crunched the knuckle. Herbert thrashed his head and his screams filled the van. Kayla's eyes sparkled with delight.

She used the pliers to cut the wires and free his wrists, then rolled him over like a limp rag doll. He tried for her throat, but one grab and shake of his broken, swollen pinkie ended all thoughts of resistance. As his face screwed into a mask of agony, she calmly re-wrapped the wire, binding his hands over his stomach.

Tears and snot streaked his face. Bleary eyes looked up at her with mindless incomprehension. In less than ten minutes, he'd gone from a meeting in a sunny park to a helpless torture victim.

She straddled him again, then reached down and unsnapped the ball-gag. It popped from his mouth and hung off his left cheekbone, a thick strand of spit running from the rubber to his lower lip.

"Please stop!" he said. "Please!"

Kayla stroked his hair once again, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I need some dirt on Sonny McGuinness."

Confusion filled Herbert's face.

"I need to blackmail him. I know you've got something I can use."

"Use? Blackmail?" Herbert stammered. "I don't... I don't know anything like that."

"You'd better come up with something," Kayla said sweetly. "Or I'll do another knuckle."

Sobs racked his voice, each word following a sharp, snot-filled intake of breath. "You... crazy... fucking... bitch!"

Kayla held up the pliers so he could see them clearly. His eyes shot open and his crying ceased immediately.

"Wait a second, just give me a second, okay? I've got something, I swear."

Kayla waited, letting Herbert think. She watched him blink furiously, as if his eyelids were mental speedometers.

"Okay," he said in a rush. "There was this mine a few years ago. The Jorgensson mine. Sonny discovered it and sold it but it went bust. You could say he knew it would run dry but he sold it anyway..."

Herbert babbled for several minutes, the sound of a broken man begging for his life. The subservient tone of his voice caressed Kayla, adding to the electricity coursing through her body. She pulled a notebook from her purse and scribbled down the information, smiling the whole time. This was exactly what she needed.

He also babbled about Sonny's new site, anything to keep her from reaching for the pliers. The words *billion-dollar find* rang loudly in Kayla's ears.

She placed the notebook back in her purse. When she finished with Herb, she'd hit the computers and get all the necessary details. Connell would have his information, and by his ridiculous deadline.

Damn you're good, girl.

Kayla stroked his hair one more time, then slid into the driver's seat and started up the van. She checked her watch: She'd snagged him, bagged him, broken him, and got the needed info in less than fifteen minutes. Not her personal best, but pretty damn close.

The gray van pulled away from the empty factory.

Kayla pulled up behind Herbert's Cadillac, then cut the copper wire around Herbert's wrists and feet. She handed him a clean white towel to clean up his wounds. Aside from the broken pinkie, he had only minor cuts on his wrist. All in all, it was a pretty clean job, one that wouldn't draw an ounce of suspicion when Herbert went to the doctor and gave some excuse for the pinkie.

Kayla smiled—true to her word, she hadn't put anybody in a wheelchair.

She opened the van and helped him out. His shoulders slumped and his head hung low, a man broken in spirit and body. He reminded her of an old balloon, saggy and half-deflated.

This, Kayla thought, was the true essence of any man.

"Now, I'm going to let you go," she said. "And you're going to keep your trap shut. If you don't, I'll give my info to the IRS, and then I'll come for your sons."

Herbert's head snapped up, pain suddenly forgotten, the spark of defiance back in his eyes. Perhaps there was a backbone in there after all.

"Let's just say little Markie and little Lukie will never play the violin again." She slowly opened and closed the pliers. The metal squeaked like a baby bird calling for food. "You understand?"

He nodded quickly, pain still in his eyes, but suppressed for the moment.

She always threatened the kids. They were better than the wife or the husband, because you never knew who would prefer their spouse tortured and dead. Threaten the children and people listen. In ten years using that theory, she'd only had to keep her promise once. Just once. And that one time had ended her NSA career.

Kayla felt a rush of that familiar anger at the man who'd drummed her out of the NSA. Not a day went by when she didn't think of it. She shook her head and tried to push the thought away. Water under the bridge. You can't go home again. She tried to think of some other folksy sayings to console herself.

Besides, she was very good at her job. Herbert had provided excellent information. Perhaps she needed to find out more, see if there was a way to profit from such a find.

She clicked the iPod and the stereo blared Lacuna Coil's "Heaven's A Lie" as she pulled away. She'd never before pried into Connell's matters for her own gains, but this time was different. This looked like the big meal ticket. "A billion-dollar find," Herbert had said. The mining industry paid top dollar for information like that—companies with platinum mines in particular. Somehow this whole situation was going to pan out for Kayla Meyers. Pan out in a big way.

9:15 p.m.

Sonny was seething inside, but it didn't stop him from enjoying his second Alaskan king crab. He cracked open a thick claw and dipped the white

meat in succulent butter sauce. He didn't know what Augustino's put in the sauce, but it was his favorite among the hundreds of four-star restaurants that knew him on a first-name basis. Despite his anger, Sonny wasn't about to let the situation spoil his dinner. Especially when someone else was picking up the tab.

The generous young man paying for the expensive meal sat across the table. The tall youngster with curly black hair looked calm, relaxed, patient. He wore a suit, but it was frumpy and even outright wrinkled in places. It reminded Sonny of something Peter Falk wore in that old *Columbo* show. Connell Kirkland obviously wasn't a typical mining corporation executive, not at all what Sonny was used to. The executive's appearance, however, was of little concern at the moment.

The most pressing question was how fast this man had made contact—less than twenty-four hours after Sonny picked up the sample testing results. After sending Chloe home with a generous tip, Sonny went looking for Herbert but wasn't surprised that the backstabber hadn't been in all day.

Herbert's betrayal infuriated Sonny. That kind of thing just wasn't done; it was the very reason Sonny always hid his finds and always had his samples tested at the same place. Apparently that strategy had paid off. If Sonny had given Herbert the find's location, Kirkland and his company would already be greasing the local politicians and buying up the property rights.

"Interestin' that you know of that find, Mr. Kirkland," Sonny said between mouthfuls of crab. "I hadn't told many people—how'd you discover it?"

Connell stared hard for a moment, expression never changing, then answered. "Let's cut the bullshit, Mr. McGuiness. I'm not going to play games with you and I hope you're not going to play them with me. You know damn well where I got the information. How you handle that aspect of the situation is up to you, I really don't care. The important thing is that I know of your find, I want it, and I want it before anyone else finds out about it."

Kirkland's abruptness surprised Sonny. Company men were usually smiles and compliments and bullshit. This guy was all business. Connell struck Sonny as the kind of man who'd sell his own mother to a Bangkok whorehouse if she could turn a regular profit.

"That would be expensive," Sonny said after washing his crab down with a big swig of milk. He never drank during business. He knew better than to lose his wits around people like Connell Kirkland.

"How expensive, Mr. McGuiness?"

Sonny took another big bite, using the napkin he'd tucked into his shirt collar to dab at some butter running through his beard. He chewed thoughtfully, staring right back at Connell. A small smile played mischievously at the wrinkles around Sonny's eyes.

"Fifteen million." He took another bite of crab. He'd expected the number to shock the executive, at least a little. Connell's gaze never fluttered.

"Perhaps if you owned the land and the mineral rights, we'd play with that number," Connell said. "But you own neither. And we both know that if you tried to buy them, we'd outbid you instantly and you'd be left with dick. Let's not bother talking about claim-jumping and other legalities. EarthCore's lawyers have twenty years experience beating cases just like this one. We'll pay one million dollars."

Sonny kept chewing, but felt his anger rising. He didn't notice a tiny bit of crab meat that perched on his beard, jiggling with each syllable. "You listen to me, you little fuck. You wanna play tough? I'll go to a dozen other companies with what I've found and start a biddin' war that will make you bend over, grab your ankles and beg me to fuck your ass if I give you the original price. Fifteen million is what I'm askin' and someone will pay it. You want the site? Fine, then you're gonna play by my rules. I been handlin' people like you since before you was a tingle in your daddy's little pecker."

"Oh?" Connell said. A smile of his own peeked out. "Somehow I doubt that you've ever dealt with someone like me."

"Forget it, Kirkland. I'm contacting Impala Platinum and the Stillwater company first thing tomorrow morning. I know damn well what I've got, and I'm putting it up on the open market. The only person who will know the location is the one who pays the most money, so your lawyer friends won't have any chance to jump the claim. If you want to play ball, fine, but you're going to have to bid on it just like everybody else."

Connell nodded, then pulled some papers from a briefcase and slid them across the table.

"Take a look at that, Mr. McGuiness," Connell said, the smile gone from his lips. "You'll see that your friend Mr. Darker was very helpful to us. Remember the gold find you sold to the Jorgensson Mining Cooperative in 1994? You know, the one that netted you six hundred and fifty thousand dollars? The one that went bust when the initial high-grade ore gave out after only a month of mining?"

"I don't guarantee my finds!" Sonny's forkful of crab bounced like a pointed finger, shaking at Connell with each word. "Everybody knows they're paying for a location, that's it! I've been doing business that way for twenty-five years."

"Yes, of course, Mr. McGuiness," Connell said calmly. "But in front of you is a statement from Mr. Darker saying that you *knew* the vein was small and that the ore grade was too low to be profitable beyond the first hundred-thousand tons. According to Mr. Darker, you knew damn well that the mine was a lemon, yet you sold it anyway."

Sonny's eyes widened with fury and his jaw dropped, the tiny piece of crap still clinging precariously to his beard. He'd done an honest trade for decades. Never screwed anybody. People knew the risks when he sold a location. No site was a sure thing. That was part of the game.

"I didn't know any such thing, you stupid fuck!" Sonny stood up abruptly, his chair scooting backward and falling on the floor. Other diners cast disapproving glances his way. "The ore I found near the surface was very rich. They agreed with my findings and that's why they bought the location!"

"That's not what Mr. Darker will say in court, after I pass this information on to the Jorgensson people, Mr. McGuiness."

Connell maintained a blank expression, while Sonny's wrinkled face betrayed murderous rage. Sonny knew, now more than ever, that this find was the big one, the proverbial mother lode. Blackmail was a risk, a big risk, and people didn't play this kind of cock-out hardball unless the payoff was worth such a risk. More than likely it was the biggest find of Sonny's long career—and now this gawky, blank-faced sonofabitch wanted to steal it.

If Sonny had been twenty years younger he'd have tossed the table aside and smashed Connell's nose like it were a ripe tomato. But those days were gone—at sixty-two he still worked the mountains better than men a third his age, but brawling wasn't a skill that had followed him into his golden years.

"Mr. McGuinness, please calm down," Connell said, his expression now full of understanding. "I'm not going to use this on you unless you force my hand. We both know it's bullshit, but that doesn't matter. Jorgensson lost millions on that deal, and if they think out you knew the mine was a lemon, they'll come after you with both barrels blazing. They'll want to make an example of you. With your prison record, you know you'll end up in jail. Now save us some time with the *I'm innocent* and *that charge will never stick* crap because we both know you're fucked."

Sonny bubbled over with anger, but nodded in agreement. He'd been outplayed before he even knew the game was on. Connell had come loaded for bear. He knew of the Jorgensson mine and he knew of Sonny's prison term. The concept of prison brought the situation home; he'd rather be screwed than risk another stint in jail, away from open skies and sprawling landscapes. Like Mama always said, a smart man knows when he's licked.

"What I want to do is negotiate a fair price," Connell said. "Fifteen million dollars is ridiculous. I'll admit, so is one million, so why don't we meet somewhere in the middle? I just happen to have the upper hand this time. You're still going to make a great deal of money and you'll still have your vacation in Rio, so let's just relax and talk business."

Sonny sat down and resigned himself to getting the best deal he could.

"I'll give you one million dollars up front, cash," Connell said. "And I'll give you two percent of the net profit for the life of the mine."

Sonny's jaw dropped. He'd never before had a permanent piece of the action. If this mine was all it seemed to be, two percent could eventually make \$15 million look like monopoly money. Connell held all the cards and they both knew it—he didn't have to offer a piece of the pie. With that bit of graciousness, most of Sonny's anger quickly faded away.

"Listen, Kirkland," Sonny said leaning forward across the table. "If you think that I'm gonna sit and wait for the checks to come in, you're crazy."

"What are you saying, Mr. McGuinness?"

"I want to be there. I don't trust you a lick, which I'm sure don't surprise you none. If you want the location, then I'm there every step of the way and I see every financial that crosses your desk. I want full access to the books for this entire project, so I know what the real net profit is."

"That's not going to happen."

"Then I guess I'm going to jail," Sonny said, and leaned back in his chair.

Connell simply stared, that same impenetrable, blank expression covering his face, hiding his thoughts. Sonny'd seen a lot of cold men in his day, but he couldn't remember anyone as unreadable as Kirkland. Sonny had no doubt, however, that Kirkland could read him like a book. Sonny was beat, but he wasn't going to lie down. He was still the only one who knew the location, and with that knowledge he had power. Jail or no jail, he wasn't going to let Connell win every hand in this game.

"I can't say I blame you," Connell said plainly.

"I'm there. I need to be involved."

"It's against company policy, Mr. McGuinness, but in your case I guess we have to make an exception," Connell said. "Come to think of it, I understand you're somewhat of an expert on the area."

"Know it better than you know the folds on your cock, mister."

"Could you research the site for us? We need to know everything that's gone on in that area, know if anyone has dug there no matter how far back. Any information we get on the area makes our job easier. And more profitable."

"I can tell you everything that happened there since the last ice age," Sonny said, a sneer on his face. "All I need is a little time."

"That you've got, Mr. McGuinness," Connell said with a winning smile. "That you've got."

To seal the deal they spent the rest of the evening getting incredibly drunk and incredibly obnoxious. When they were finally thrown out at 1:00 a.m. Sonny looked forward to participating in the mine's success—the fact he'd been blackmailed all but forgiven.

Drunk off his ass, however, he forgot one important fact. With the deal, he'd placed himself in a situation he'd sought to avoid. He had to return to that mountain, the dead mountain where animals had the good sense not to tread.

Chapter 6

August 5, 2:59 a.m.

Connell turned sideways in his sleep, his long legs hanging off the side of the Motel 6 bed. A smile graced his lips. A smile for his wife. If anyone who knew him could have seen him at that moment, they'd probably have been shocked to see that expression on Connell Kirkland's face.

The smile suddenly vanished, replaced by face-scrunched fear. He kicked at the sheets, thrashing about in the bed, his head shaking back and forth in a violent "no-no-no."

He awoke screaming, hands flailing and knocking the bedside lamp across the room. The cheap porcelain body shattered against the pumping air conditioner. He sat up, stomach heaving as he gasped for breath, and wearily rested his head in his hands.

The glowing red numbers of the alarm clock read 3:02 a.m.—6:02 a.m. Detroit time. Since he was already awake, he might as well get cracking. He didn't want to bother with a shower, but the stink of fear clung to his sweaty body. He rinsed quickly, towed off, and tossed on his suit, which had been carelessly flung on the floor, tie still knotted loosely around the empty shirt collar. By the time he left the hotel he had pushed the dream from his mind.

August 5, 8:27 a.m.

Sonny's first duty as consultant was to apply his expertise and research the site's history. He rose at 8 a.m. with a wake-up call from the front desk and sonofabitch of a hangover. He hoped Kirkland felt worse. Ten minutes later a full breakfast came courtesy of room service. Sonny hadn't ordered the food, but he ate it anyway. He checked out a half-hour later only to find his hotel bill paid courtesy of EarthCore. Keys to a brand-new rental Cadillac DeVille waited for him at the desk. Like the hotel bill, the car was paid in full. Along with the keys came a package and a short note from Connell Kirkland: *Get cracking—we have to act fast. I'll call you tomorrow at 5 p.m. for your first report.*

Sonny opened the package: a cell phone. Sonny pocketed the phone and walked to the Caddy, whistling all the way, only to find a dangerous-looking Asian man (Sonny couldn't be sure whether he was Japanese or Korean, maybe...) leaning on the hood. Glossy black hair fell just short of his smiling black eyes. Sonny immediately took in the man's perfectly tailored pants and his Gucci shoes—a sharp dresser with expensive tastes.

"Good morning, Mr. McGuiness." The man flashed a smile that could charm a snake out of its skin. "I'm Cho Takachi. Mr. Kirkland sent me."

"And what are you supposed to do, drive the car?"

"If you like," Cho said. "I'm here to assist you in any way I can."

"Kirkland is a sonofabitch and I don't need any *assistance*." Sonny walked around to the driver side. Cho let himself in the passenger door—with his own key.

"If you don't need my assistance, then I get paid to stand around and do nothing," Cho said, his joviality undaunted. "Easy money. That's fine with me. I'm also here to make sure you don't back out on your deal with EarthCore."

Sonny started the car. He'd never thought Connell would hire a baby-sitter. Sonny sighed and resigned himself to the situation. Wasn't much he could do about it anyway, and judging from that chrome-plated, pearl-handled .45 peeking out from under Cho's jacket, Sonny didn't want to push the situation.

"Fine," Sonny said. "Just one thing; stay the hell out of my way. I don't trust fuckhead company goons like you."

"No problem," Cho said with a charming grin. "I don't trust dirty, wrinkled-up, little-old-asshole prospectors, so I empathize with your situation."

Sonny blinked a few times in surprise, then put the car in gear and smiled a little himself.

He liked this Cho Takachi already.

The drive to Provo went amiably enough. Sonny discovered that Cho had served in the Marines for four years. After hearing a few details of Cho's service tour in Iraq, Sonny decided he'd much rather have Cho for a friend than an enemy.

Hungry for discovery, they went straight to the Brigham Young University library. Cho proved to be a highly educated and eager assistant right from the start.

Prospecting for information was nothing new to Sonny. He'd researched hundreds of old mines and depleted areas in his day. It was valuable to know who found what and how they found it, as well as how long it lasted and what extraction methods were last used. A vein that "ran dry" in 1914 could be reworked with leaching or strip-mine techniques made possible by modern technology. If you found one of these veins, bought up the worthless property and

then sold it to a mining company, you stood to make a tidy profit. Time and time again Sonny had scooped the young prospectors. Their fancy equipment often overlooked the obvious—it's much easier to find an old mine than to discover a new vein.

In researching his mountain, he started with the computer indexes, everything from books to periodicals. He didn't find diddly. There was probably more written about the boys-gymnasium shitter than that area of Utah. It was almost as if the peak didn't exist to the general public. It didn't even have a name. Tourists didn't visit. There was no water; nothing but rocks, sand, and devilish terrain. Only experienced campers ventured into the hills.

When the infernal machines known as computers proved useless, Sonny led Cho to the library's real mother lode of information—bound volumes of long-dead ghost-town newspapers. Many towns popped up during the booming days of Nevada's Comstock Lode in the 1860s. Those towns depended on the surrounding mines. When the mines dried up, so did the towns.

In any American small town, one can usually find leather-bound tomes containing old issues that often date as far back as a century or more. For ghost towns, it wasn't so easy. Many of the dead papers' back issues were bound, but you had to track them down. The irreplaceable historical volumes could wind up just about anywhere (Sonny had once found vital issues of the *Sand Spring Recorder*, a paper from a dead town in central Utah, in a private library in Laramie, Wyoming).

History faded away, and no one—not even those born and raised in the area—knew anything about the majority of the mines that had once dotted the desolate landscape. Much of the information sat lonely and waiting in those ghost-town newspapers. A newspaper was a big part of mining town life in those days. If a new mine returned anything, readers wanted to know. They also wanted to know what areas were hot; “rushes” to a new site were as common as the sunrise.

Sonny's first guess for any mining news concerning the Wah Wah site was the *Silver Reef Gazette*. Silver Reef was a famous ghost town about eighty miles south of where he'd discovered the platinum dust. Eighty miles through the rocky desert flats constituted at least a two-day ride, and that was if a single rider really pushed a healthy horse. Any kind of wagon could count on a three- or four-day ride. The Gazette carried local stock exchange information and news regarding the hundreds of mining corporations that sprang up in Southwest Utah, Northwest Arizona, and even into Nevada.

After six hours of squinting at yellowed and faded old newsprint, Sonny finally found something useful from May 10, 1865.

Jessup stakes claim in Wah Wah area By Stosh Wittendon

Jebadaiah Jessup, who produced very successful claims in Nevada and in the Wasatch Mountains, has staked a claim in the remote Wah Wah range.

We see claims staked everywhere these days, but this reporter was surprised to see a claim in the northern Wah Wah Mountains. There have been only two or three decent prospecting excursions to that area, and

nothing has ever turned up. Many think that Jessup may be onto something. The town holds its breath waiting for him to return with the first cartloads of ore. Some motivated prospectors have already headed out to that area, hoping they can get a jump on the competition should Jessup's hunch prove right.

If Jessup discovers anything of substance, it might require construction of a new town. Jessup's claim is 87 miles north of Silver Reef, too far for transportation of ore when there are no trails or decent areas on which to build them.

The story surprised Sonny. Eighty-seven miles north of Silver Reef would have put Jessup within a mile of where Sonny discovered the spring. In fact, less than a mile. Platinum was almost unheard of in those days. It often occurred alongside gold deposits, but many miners threw away the platinum because they didn't know what it was and only wanted the gold. Before 1900 or so, most recovery processes lost up to 99 percent of the ore's value, and often lost all the platinum group metals.

The more he thought about it, however, the more it made sense. If the spring Sonny discovered was bigger back in 1865, there would have been a good-sized stream to pan. Jessup may have found that very same spring—or one similar to it—and staked a claim.

Sonny found the next entry regarding the mine on August 24, 1865. Jessup had apparently returned to Silver Reef with a bag of dust, only to find his treasure-trove wasn't as it seemed.

Wah Wah site full of "fool's silver"
Jessup claim a wash
Will continue to dig the area
by Stosh Wittendon

All the speculation surrounding the mysterious Wah Wah site staked by Jebadaiah Jessup has come to an end. Jessup arrived in town yesterday with 10 pounds of dust, which he took to local chemist Elron Wyrick for analysis. Wyrick told a disappointed Jessup that the dust was not silver, as Jessup had thought, but platinum. Wyrick commented that it's rare to find such high quantities of platinum.

Jessup declined to comment on the development, which is no surprise, considering that he wants to keep his site secret. Jessup has worked his claim for three months, and rumor has it he has killed two men defending it. Mining parties are already forming, bent on probing the Wah Wah Mountains for similar platinum deposits.

Wyrick is sending a cable east to find a buyer for the platinum. Such a large amount will bring a tidy sum, but, unlike gold, demand for platinum exists only in the metropolitan centers of the East. Wyrick advanced Jessup money to buy mining equipment, dynamite and lumber for square-set supports of a future underground mine. Jessup also hired a crew of ten men to work the site.

Sonny's mouth went dry.

"A ten-pound bag?" Cho said. "How much would that be worth today?"

"About a hundred and thirty thousand big ones."

Cho let out a long whistle. Sonny flipped through the pages. Like a soap-opera junkie left hanging at the end of a Friday episode, Sonny couldn't wait to read of Jessup's fortune. He wanted to get back to the spring and do some panning himself. Maybe pull out a few more pounds of dust, especially before Connell got his paws on the site.

Sonny's excitement chilled when he read the next entry, dated November 30, 1865. The story of the Jessup mine suddenly changed from minor coverage to front-page news with thick, black, screaming headlines.

Murder at Jessup mine
Two dead, eight missing, victims of madness
Jessup to hang tomorrow morning
by Stosh Wittendon

It seems that mining madness ran amok last week, claiming more than its usual share of victims. Jebadaiah Jessup butchered at least two of his own men. Eight more men are missing and presumed dead.

Chuck Wierenski of Chuck's Feed & Grain was on his normal supply run to the Jessup mine. Wierenski found Jessup wandering in the desert, about three miles from the mine.

"Jessup was ranting on and on about monsters," Wierenski said. "He said these demons killed his crew. He had a pretty bad cut on his arm and was bleeding all over the place. He was clutching this strange knife in his hand."

Wierenski brought the madman back to town, where Sheriff Tate took over. Tate locked Jessup in the jail and mounted a posse to head out to the mine. Tate returned this morning, telling a grim tale of murder and insanity.

"There were no monsters, only dead men," Tate told me when he arrived. "Jessup must have killed them. We found two bodies. They'd been hacked up a bit before they ran out into the desert, where they died."

Tate was unable to locate Jessup's mining camp, and now speculates that Jessup lied on his official claim registry to protect the location of his mine. Tate said he found nothing at the official campsite, and no evidence a camp ever existed there. Wierenski refuses to travel to the mountain ever again, due to fears of an Indian curse.

This reporter has rendered pictures of the strange curved knife below. The knife is a solid piece of metal. Its maker is unknown.

The sketch showed the curious murder weapon. There were two crescents, joined back-to-back and off-set a little, so that the knife made a loose, pointy "S" shape. An open circle sat in the middle of that S, where the two crescents merged into one piece of metal. Sonny had never seen anything like it.

"Looks like homeboy went a little off his rocker," Cho said, reading the article over Sonny's shoulder. The story shocked Sonny, and not because of the murders. Tales of murder in the golden age of mining were so common that many killings barely merited a paragraph in the local paper. In some towns things grew so out of

control that there was at least one murder a week. Men often killed in the hills, either to protect a mine or because they just went crazy. Months in the desert, feverishly digging through the rocks, running out of food and water, fending off attacks by Indians and, more often, by claim jumpers—all of these things often drove men over the edge.

The thing that bothered Sonny was the feeling he'd had while on that cursed mountain, when he'd found the spring. Something felt wrong there, something felt ... evil. He wondered if Jessup had felt the same thing, so many years ago.

Sonny rubbed his eyes. He had to pass this information on to Connell, and he had to get out soon and find the actual location of the Jessup mine.

5:08 p.m.

Connell opened up a browser window and typed in "earthcore.biz/intranet." He typed in his logon and password, then started calling up information on one of EarthCore's key employees. Now that Connell had the location of Sonny's "Silver Spring," the real work could begin. The entire area surrounding Sonny's discovery needed to be examined with a fine-toothed scientific comb in order to find the platinum dust's source. Connell trusted only one man to properly execute the vital task.

While EarthCore had no less than five certified geniuses on the payroll, Angus Kool sat atop the heap. Connell had hired Kool sight unseen three years ago, right after the scientist procured his third Ph.D. at the age of twenty. Within a year, Kool was named EarthCore's top scientist and placed in charge of the company's research division.

Connell hadn't set foot in any of EarthCore's labs in over four years, since before Cori died. It wasn't as if his presence was needed. Under Angus's control, the department clicked like a finely tuned machine—though perhaps a well-disciplined Nazi SS squad was a more fitting analogy. Kool ran the lab with dictatorial hand and demanded perfection from his underlings, some of whom were more than twice his age.

McGuinness's find required immediate analysis, which meant Kool needed to be in the lab ASAP. Connell called up EarthCore's master personnel schedule, only to find Kool on vacation—yet again—this time caving in Montana. The man didn't just study geology, he lived it, traveling to all corners of the world spelunking. Wild blood pumped through Kool's veins. He was an adrenaline junkie who arrogantly demanded over three months of vacation each year for daredevil stunts like mountain climbing, skydiving, base-jumping and jungle canoe excursions—but mostly for spelunking. Connell wasn't surprised to hear Kool was out, but he needed the man in Detroit. Now.

The itinerary showed that Kool was on vacation with Randy Wright, another of EarthCore's big-brained scientists. Randy was Angus's little adrenaline-addicted sidekick. Wright had been at EarthCore a good ten years. Maybe he could share some wisdom with Angus. Connell didn't really care what it took, as long as they were both back to the office tomorrow morning.

When Angus Kool and Randy Wright emerged from the Dunston Caves in Montana, mud covered them from head to toe in a thick brown slime. That mud dried on the drive back to the hotel, and by the time Angus walked into the lobby, chunks were flaking off him with every step. He could have wiped himself off like Randy had, but he enjoyed seeing the look of disgust on the hotel manager's fat face.

Plebeian, Angus thought. *If all his mind can focus on is a little dirt on his carpet, then he deserves some aggravation.*

Angus walked to the front desk and banged his hard hat on the counter, sending chunks of dried mud scattering across the countertop. The manager's face swelled with barely repressed anger as Angus wiped the filth from the side of his white plastic helmet, revealing a plethora of Peanuts stickers, mostly Snoopy and Schroeder.

"Any messages?" Angus asked with an innocent smile. The manager's name tag read Moe, something Angus found ever so fitting.

"Yes sir," Moe said through a failed attempt at a smile. "A Mr. Connell Kirkland called for you, said to call this number immediately." The manager held out a scrap of paper, which Angus ignored.

"Hold all outside calls," Angus said with an arrogant wave of his hand as he walked away, leaving a trail of mud crumbs in his wake.

As Angus walked to the elevator, Moe stared hatefully at his back.

Randy brushed the countertop mud into a neat pile, then swept it into his upturned helmet.

"Sorry," Randy said, an apologetic smile on his face. Black-framed glasses highlighted laugh-lined eyes. He was so skinny the coveralls hung on him like the clothes of a prisoner of war. Sweat matted his thinning black hair.

Moe looked down at the now semi-clean counter, then up at Randy's face. Randy was a short man, and still a good two inches taller than that red-haired pain in the ass that went by the name of "Dr. Angus Kool."

"Thanks," Moe said dryly.

Randy shrugged and walked to the elevator, holding the helmet upside down so as not to spill any more dirt on the lobby carpet.

Moe watched Randy enter the elevator. As soon as the doors closed, Moe unfurled the scrap of paper and dialed.

Yeah, I'll hold all your calls, you pompous little piece of shit. He waited for the call to ring through.

"Hello? Yes, connect me to Connell Kirkland please. He'll want to speak with me immediately. Tell him it concerns Angus Kool."

Angus entered his room and immediately stripped out of his coveralls, leaving him clothed in only sweaty underwear and a grimy T-shirt decorated with a big picture of a dancing Snoopy. The coveralls sat on the floor, a crusty pile of fabric and dirt.

A shower would be the thing. A long, hot shower, clean all this dirt off and then find someplace with a big greasy burger and greasier fries. He and Randy could plan out the next three days. They'd discovered a new branch of the Dunston

Caves. The branch was tiny, barely enough room to crawl through, but it was new. Never before seen by man. They'd slithered through three hundred yards of thin mud to find it, then explored a good fifty feet of the coffin-sized passage before turning back. There was no hurry; after all, they had another three days to explore. And if that wasn't enough, Angus would just call in and demand more vacation time.

The phone rang, breaking his thoughts. He answered it automatically.

"What's up?" he said, expecting to hear Randy.

"Angus Kool?" The voice was not Randy's. Angus remembered the message waiting for him at the front desk. He felt his anger rise at the manager, who'd obviously done this on purpose. Angus hated uppity common people; they just weren't smart enough to see the big picture. Kind of like monkeys with vocal abilities.

Angus sighed. "This is he. If this is work, it had better be good."

"It's work, Mr. Kool, and it's *damn* good. This is Connell Kirkland."

"Hello, Mr. Kirkland." Angus hated to use the word *mister* with anyone, but if there was one piece of corporate mythos he believed, it was that Kirkland was one bad mamma-jamma, someone you didn't cross unless you were ready for a serious altercation. Of course, Kirkland was used to dealing with businessmen, and that was a far cry from crossing swords with someone of Angus Kool's mental abilities.

"I just got in and was getting ready to call you," Angus said. "What can I do for you?"

"I need you in Detroit immediately, Mr. Kool. We have a development that demands your attention."

"Immediately? But I'm on vacation."

"We have a matter of major importance to the company that needs your attention. You are booked on the 8:45 p.m. flight to Detroit out of Butte. You will be on it."

"Like hell I will. Who do you think you are? What's the company going to do, fire me? I don't think so. Whatever it is can wait. I'm busy."

"You decide that for yourself, Mr. Kool," Connell said. "If you're not on that plane and back to work tomorrow at eight a.m., you will be in a great deal of trouble."

"Oh puh-leeze. Come on, Mr. Kirkland. No one is going to fire me and you know it. If you canned me, my considerable talents would be working for the competition inside of twenty-four hours. As a matter of fact, that sounds pretty good right now. I think I'll sharpen up my resume and see what the big world has to offer. What do you think of that, Mr. Big Stuff?"

There was a brief pause. Angus waited for Kirkland's inevitable backpedaling. Suits, after all, should keep to their own petty little affairs and not bother the intellectual elite.

"If you think you can do better than EarthCore, be my guest," Connell said in a flat, cold voice. "But if I were you, I wouldn't underestimate the power of one's reputation."

"My reputation is flawless."

"Is it, Angus? Funny, I have a very different perspective on things. And—I'd imagine—so might anyone else who contacts me regarding your abilities. Or, for that matter, anyone else I should choose to contact on my own."

Angus sat down on the bed, his eyes narrow, his nostrils flaring. Could Kirkland really trash his rep? Could he? Kirkland was a legend in the mining community, known as a ruthless, no-holds-barred bastard when it came to acquiring sites. He was also known as a plain dealer once he had what he wanted. The most important thing, of course, was simply that he was known. He was a man with influence in the field, a man who might be able to sully even the stainless reputation of a purebred genius. No, he couldn't have that much sway in the field. People would know anything Kirkland had to say was sour grapes, they would know with but the briefest examination of the facts that Angus Kool was the greatest mind of a generation.

"Maybe I'll have to take my chances," Angus said.

"Maybe you will, but I don't think that's in your best interest. Please don't be late tomorrow." The connection broke and the phone filled with the dial-tone drone.

The fact that Angus didn't slam the phone down was a feat of self-control. He ran his hands through his dirty shock of coarse coppery hair. He'd been talked to, as a father might give his son a good *talking to*. On top of that, he'd been hung up on. The audacity was simply too much to grasp.

Who the fuck was this Kirkland, anyway? Some stupid executive who thought that an MBA was a measure of intelligence? Angus hated executives. He'd stack his three Ph.D.s up against a mountain of MBAs any day.

He'd fly home all right. He'd storm right into Barbara Yakely's office and raise holy hell. If she didn't know how her pet thug Connell Kirkland ran the business, he'd fill her in. Connell might be her favorite, but she'd surely never let anyone talk to Angus Kool that way. Never.

Chapter 7

August 6, 8:39 a.m.

Angus Kool slammed open the lab door, his face a narrow-eyed visage of rage. He seemed to leave an almost-visible contrail of emotion. He'd been *talked to* for the second time in two days. Only this time it wasn't Mr. Big Stuff Connell Kirkland who did the *talking to*, it was Barbara Yakely. And her lecture made Connell's seem timid by comparison.

He'd stormed into the RenCen offices expecting Yakely to bend over backwards, and instead found out she'd be more than happy to help out with Kirkland's dirty tricks. Angus no longer had any doubt who was in charge of EarthCore. Yakely and Kirkland, in that order. Angus ranked *third*. A distant third.

Angus had never been second at anything in his life, let alone third. It had been all he could do to walk out of her office without screaming, to leave the building

without smashing something, to get in his car and drive to the lab without suffering a burst of road rage.

He'd show them both. Sooner or later, he'd show them.

The staff watched him stomp through the lab, leaving haughty indignance in his wake. He headed straight for his office, not volunteering a word to anyone. This lab, *his lab*, was a place where he ruled, where he called the shots. To be summoned here, ordered around like an undergrad—it was insufferable. Angus ripped open the door to his office, intending to slam it loudly behind him.

But there, sitting on Angus's desk, was grim-faced Patrick O'Doyle. Angus froze for a moment, surprised to see the burly man in his office. O'Doyle was EarthCore's security chief and all-around badass. Rumor had it he was an ex-Green Beret. Rumor also had it he'd been a secret government sniper, and that he'd once whacked a head of state in some third-world country.

O'Doyle's piercing eyes seemed to hold little value for human life. He was big, a little shorter than Connell's six-foot-four frame but much heavier, weighing perhaps 250 pounds. His burgeoning beer belly stood as the only blemish on an otherwise thick and muscular frame. Each time O'Doyle moved, Angus saw both the twitchings of muscle and the jiggings of gut.

He looked old enough to be Angus's father. A thinning white crew cut covered a pinkish scalp. A mass of scar tissue clung to where O'Doyle's right ear should have been. He had a freshly scrubbed appearance complete with an immaculate, wrinkle-free blue uniform. He gave Angus the impression of a two-legged, thick-necked, one-eared bulldog.

"Good morning, Dr. Kool," O'Doyle said politely.

"What the hell are you doing in my office?" Angus suspected his angry tone wasn't quite as convincing as he would have liked it to be.

O'Doyle didn't answer. Instead, he handed Angus a printout of an e-mail.

To: *podoyle@earthcore.biz*

From: *ckirkland@earthcore.biz*

Re: Priority assignment

A courier will hand-deliver a confidential report to you today. Give the report to Angus Kool. He will see the considerable potential in this report. I need him to make an immediate and thorough study of the area listed. This is his only project, everything else is on hold. I authorize you to acquire whatever he needs regarding equipment, resources, and time from existing staff. No outsiders.

—Kirkland

"Mr. Kirkland phoned me this morning and asked me to make sure you were here on time," O'Doyle said. His voice was deep and thick, yet respectful. "He'll be pleased to know that you're early. I've been permanently assigned to your department. No one is to enter or leave without my knowledge, on orders from Mrs. Yakely. I know this will be an inconvenience, but no one is allowed to take any material out of this lab until further notice. Should you work late, we've converted the east storage room into a bunkhouse for the convenience of you and your staff. I'll stay out of your way as best I can."

Kool's curiosity dominated his immediate anger at this intrusion on his authority. He'd never seen anything like this in his three years at EarthCore. What the hell was happening that could light such a fire under Connell's ass? What could produce this level of urgency, or paranoia?

As if to answer the thought, O'Doyle reached into his pocket, pulled out a jangling key chain, and unlocked a steel briefcase sitting at his feet. He removed a red folder.

"This is the report I was instructed to give you. You are to read it and then give it back to me. No one on your staff is to know about the contents. You are instructed, by Mr. Kirkland, not to discuss details of this information with your staff, although he understands you will have to have them work on various aspects of it."

"What's this all about?" Angus asked as he took the folder, his curiosity so strong the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

"I don't know, sir. I'm not authorized to look at it."

Angus opened the folder, his mind spinning at the militaristic, secretive overtones that had suddenly engulfed his job. It contained a metallurgical analysis report. One glance at the report, and everything suddenly became clear. Now he understood O'Doyle's presence, as well as Kirkland's urgency and threats. EarthCore was sitting on what could be the richest mine in history.

The report's numbers shocked Angus. The sample was almost pure platinum mixed with iridium. Naturally occurring precious metals contained impurities; even *dust* contained impurities—but not this sample.

With the revolutionary techniques he'd recently developed, he could make a map of the very ground itself and hopefully pinpoint the exact source of the dust. If that source proved to have any size whatsoever, the profit margin could prove staggering.

"I'll need to contact Harrison Geo-surveying immediately," Angus said. "We need their helicopters."

"No outsiders," O'Doyle said. "Mr. Kirkland was quite specific about that."

Angus stamped his foot. "But I have to survey the area immediately!"

"Tell me what you need," O'Doyle said calmly.

"I need helicopters, at least two, and they need to be retrofitted with new equipment I've developed. And they need to be the big cargo type."

"Just give me a printout of what you need, and I'll make it happen."

"I don't think you understand," Angus said. "We're talking a half-million each. Kirkland going to authorize that?"

O'Doyle smiled patiently. "Of course, sir. If you'd just give me the printout, I'll take care of it."

Angus let out a low whistle. If Kirkland was spending that kind of money without batting an eyelash, he was betting the proverbial farm on this project.

"I'll provide EarthCore employees as pilots and crew, sir," O'Doyle said. "But you need to assign technical people to run the tests. Mr. Kirkland asks that you assign your best people, your most trusted people, to handle any fieldwork."

Angus nodded, then turned quickly toward the lab. A strong hand on his shoulder stopped him before he reached the door. Startled, he turned.

O'Doyle offered a polite smile. "You have to leave the file with me, sir."

Angus blinked a few times, not understanding, then looked down at the red folder in his hand. "Oh... sorry." He practically threw the folder at O'Doyle.

Eyes snapped up as he strode into the lab. He felt better, he felt like himself again. Here was a project that would demand every ounce of his genius.

"Randy, saddle up! You're heading to Utah."

Sonny McGuinness and Cho Takachi continued to dig for background on the Wah Wah site. They'd spent forty of the last forty-eight hours buried among BYU's musty archives, digging their way through countless yellowing newspapers, rare texts and research journals that were old before the computer was even invented. Cho kept popping No-Doz, and Sonny ribbed him for violating Mormon rules against caffeine.

"It's disrespectful," Sonny said. "We're at Brigham Young, for crying out loud."

Cho looked exhausted. "What do you want from me, old man? Connell didn't tell me I'd be up for two days straight."

Sonny laughed. "So much for your 'easy money,' eh, kid?"

"Don't worry, it's not like I haven't pulled all-nighters before. I was a medic in the Marine's, first class. I went to med school after that."

"You're a doctor?"

"Was a doctor. For about a year."

"What the hell are you doing for EarthCore, then?"

Cho shrugged. "I didn't like working in hospitals. Too much politics, too much BS with insurance companies and all that."

Sonny nodded. "Uh-huh. You got sued, did you?"

Cho looked angry for a second, then broke into a tired smile. "You're pretty damn sharp for an old wrinkled fossil. Yeah, I got sued."

"And this must be so much more exciting than a boring old emergency ward," Sonny said.

Cho shrugged and yawned. "Actually, this is pretty cool stuff. Now can we get back to work before I pass out?"

Sonny hadn't found much more on the Wah Wah Mountains, let alone the area of the platinum find. People didn't write about it for much the same reason poets didn't wax romantic about a pile of cat crap—the Wah Wahs were ugly and held little interest. Sonny did, however, find a few geological surveys of the area, mostly obscure research papers written by graduate students. One of these proved immensely interesting.

"Tunnel Systems in the Lower Wah Wah Mountain Range," was the name of a paper written by one Samuel J. Anderson in 1942. Sonny came across a reference to Anderson while browsing through thick, leather-bound tomes of old Brigham Young student newspapers, the story describing the grad student's discovery of cave formations in the Wah Wah range. Sonny investigated central filing and found the report—paper worn thin and spotted with mold—buried in a rust-specked filing cabinet. It obviously hadn't been read in decades. Many of the old research papers were still filed away, remnants from the days when Brigham Young was a small school and didn't have twenty thousand students.

Sonny only gave the report a cursory glance until he read the tunnel's location, which—if accurate—put the cave less than a mile northeast of the Silver Spring.

That location also rested just over a half-mile east of the Jessup mine coordinates. Anderson's cave was smack-dab in the middle of a pair of platinum finds.

The report detailed Anderson's discovery of a long passage located about five thousand feet up the side of the mountain. He and his fellow students followed one of the tunnels for around four hundred feet before hitting an old cave-in that blocked further access. Anderson surmised that primitive people had once lived in the caves; he based that theory on a tool discovered deep in the tunnels.

Sonny's blood chilled as he read more on the tool. Anderson thought it worthy of little more than a footnote compared to the geological formations, but it did strike him odd enough to list a brief description.

"Approximately seventy-five yards into the cave, we found a primitive tool. It appears to be a scraper, perhaps, or possibly a weapon. It is a metal blade, obviously made by a skilled craftsman, measuring 13.5" in length and 3.75" at the widest point. A crude, thin rope, mostly decomposed, was tied through a hole in the blade where it met the central ring. The culture that created it was obviously very skilled at working metal. The knife has a jagged edge on the outside curve, which has remained very sharp despite sitting in a cave for who knows how long. The knife appears to be steel. The quality of work seems excellent, but not being an anthropologist, I'm sure that such artifacts such as these are nothing out of the ordinary. I'll turn it over to the anthropology department."

Anderson's paper included a crude sketch of the blade. The nasty-looking, double-crescent shape looked exactly like the murder weapon Jessup had used almost eighty years earlier.

In the report, Anderson had written the number 32 next to the knife. A footnote reference. Sonny looked at the footnote and found another number. He excitedly jotted down the number in his notes.

"What are you writing?" Cho asked.

"This looks like an archive reference," Sonny said. "I'll bet Anderson turned the knife over to the anthropology department. In most museums they've got more stuff than they can deal with. Tons of material is archived. You should see these sonofabitchin' vaults—even the oldest museum workers don't know what half the stuff is anymore."

"So this knife is still around?"

"Could be. We'll check it out as soon as we're finished here."

Cho threw Sonny a quizzical look. "What's an archived knife got to do with mining?"

Sonny scratched absently at his beard. It was a good question. What did the knife of some long-gone Indian tribe have to do with the platinum find? Probably nothing. But that didn't stop Sonny's curiosity. If the knife existed, the same kind of knife Jessup used to slaughter his men, Sonny simply had to see it.

"You never know," Sonny said after a long pause. "That's twice this weird knife has come up. I wanna make sure we don't miss a damn thing."

"You certainly are a persistent old fart, Sonny," Cho said with a tired sigh.

"Watch and learn, boy. You don't get to be as rich as me using good looks and a long pecker—and you ain't got either."

Cho laughed as Sonny continued to pour over Anderson's paper. The report concluded by detailing plans for another excursion, scheduled for March 1942.

Anderson had found a possible blockage in the tunnels. He felt if he could clear it out, the shaft might extend farther into the mountain.

They found no other papers from Anderson. Sonny went back to the bound volumes of *The Y News*, the college paper, starting with March 1942. The paper was small back then; most issues were little more than six pages long. It was easy to quickly browse a year's worth of newspapers. After only three minutes he found another article on Anderson, dated April 4, 1942.

They read the account of the students' disappearance. Sonny felt a cold breeze blow over his soul.

"Keep flipping," Cho said. "Maybe they found them later on."

Accounts of the missing students were in every issue of *The Y News*, but the articles grew smaller and smaller. The last article Sonny could find appeared in an issue dated May 30, 1942. It simply said that the students were presumed dead.

"Starting to look like it's not a very nice place," Cho said, his joviality subdued for the moment. "Maybe we should just call it Funeral Mountain."

Sonny's mind whirled as he picked up his cup and spat some Copenhagen tobacco juice into it, a thin trail clinging from his white beard to the cup's edge as he set it down. There were only two well documented explorations of that area, and both times those parties turned up dead or missing. Or insane. Sonny was beginning to think that there was a reason this platinum find had gone unnoticed for well over a century. He was also beginning to doubt his involvement with EarthCore's project.

But he couldn't back out, not yet, not with two percent of the mine's future on the line. Sure, he had a million bucks, but that two percent could amount to an ungodly amount in both the near and far future. That two percent income was the legacy he could leave his children and grandchildren, enough money to set them all up for their entire lives.

His contract stated that if he left the project before the mine was running and turning a profit, he would forfeit his percentage. If he wanted that two percent, he had to see this thing through.

That could take months. Months of being on that mountain, with that clammy feeling of darkness creeping up his groin and tickling his balls. He should fly to Rio right now, and have his balls tickled by something much more hospitable than that desolate, dead mountain.

It wasn't just the money. He needed to know *why* people kept going missing—or dead—on Funeral Mountain. His curiosity had always overpowered his good sense. Sometimes that curiosity led him to fortune, like when he followed up even the thinnest lead and struck pay dirt, or it led him to dead ends, like when he spent weeks *proving* there was no substance to a certain lead. What happened with the leads themselves was usually incidental. Sonny had to know the *whole* story, no matter how trivial it might be.

There was more to learn, more dark secrets buried in mildewy piles of paper and stacks of forgotten ledgers. Things that didn't want to be found, that wanted to die and fade away into the past.

August 9

The CH-47 C Chinook helicopter buzzed through the night sky over the Wah Wah mountains, back and forth, back and forth, each pass another tenth of a mile south. Small antennae arrays fixed to the bottom of the helicopter fired powerful radar signals into the ground and recorded their reflections.

Randy Wright sat in the Chinook's cargo bay. He watched data feed into his laptop, data showing the area's underground composition. The night before they'd completed the north-south lines of the grid, and in another two hours or so they'd finish the east-west lines. It was quite an accomplishment, a twenty-five mile grid knocked out in two night's worth of flying.

He had a crew on the ground collecting soil and plant samples from all over the area. Another crew was preparing a series of explosives. Advanced instruments would detect reflections of the explosive shock waves. Once they finished the radar grid, collected the data, and boxed all of the samples, the crew would detonate the explosives and gather the readings.

Once that was done, they'd load up the data and he'd head back to Detroit. It was a two-day data-collection sprint, the scientific equivalent of a commando raid. With the technology at his disposal, however, two days was all it would take to provide Angus with everything he needed.

Chapter 8

August 11

"So what are you telling me, Sonny?" Connell said into his cell phone as he took the Wayne Road exit off of I-94. "That we need to scrap the whole project because there's some bad history in the area?"

"I don't think you could classify multiple murders and missing persons as simply 'bad history,' Connell," Sonny said. "I think that mountain is cursed."

"Cursed? Oh come on, Sonny, don't tell me you're superstitious."

"You're goddamned right I am. Hell, Connell, I'm the friggin' *definition* of superstitious."

"So are you telling me your professional evaluation is we need to stay off that mountain? Is that what you're telling me, that we walk away from the discovery because you've got a bad vibe?"

Sonny paused a moment. "Well, I don't know if I'd go that far."

"Good, because that's not the shit I need to hear right now," Connell said. "You've given your report, you've found prior evidence of people panning the area for dust, so that helps validate our computer models. You've done a good job. Now if you want to stay off the mountain and forfeit your two percent, I have no problem with that. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not!"

"Good. Then I don't want to hear anymore of this crap, and I'll expect to see you on-site."

Sonny sighed. "Okay, Connell."

"See you in a couple of days." Connell hung up as he pulled into EarthCore's main research campus.

Four years. Had it been that long since he'd come to the EarthCore lab? That long since he'd stopped by just to see how everyone was doing? There had been a time when he didn't let a week go by without stopping by the company's main lab near Romulus, a Detroit suburb, touching base, talking to the technicians, getting the scoop on the latest research techniques, the latest family news, the latest office gossip. Of course, there was also a time when he gave a shit. He got far more done staying in his office at the Renaissance Center, working the phone and the computer, than he ever had when he took an interest in people's lives.

The nondescript building in a nondescript industrial park in a nondescript part of town had no signage, which was status quo for any EarthCore facility. From the outside, it was just another faceless building in the midst of a dense industrial sprawl.

No one had left the lab in three days. At first Angus ordered everyone to stay, but that order rapidly became unnecessary as the staff pieced the situation together. And when Randy returned from Utah with a laptop full of data, the excitement level soared beyond measure. People slept only in snatches, and Angus's demands pushed everyone's talents beyond natural limits.

Angus mentioned briefly to Patrick O'Doyle that some of the scientists had families. O'Doyle made a quick call and then assured the staff that everyone's family was taken care of. EarthCore staffers baby-sat, cooked, cleaned, and helped shuffle kids to and from school. It didn't stop parents and spouses from feeling guilty, but it did comfort them enough to stay in the lab and keep working around the clock.

When Connell Kirkland arrived that morning, the lab looked as if it were staffed by zombies on crack. Bleary-eyed people scurried everywhere, hair dirty and sticking out in all directions, lab coats wrinkled, eyes adorned with dark bags. The only one who still looked normal was Angus Kool.

It surprised Connell to see how much the labs had changed. New equipment lined the walls of the original lab, which had expanded from the original building to two additional buildings in the industrial park.

As Connell entered the room, work slowly ground to a halt. Technicians stared at him in obvious shock. He recognized most of them. Others, he realized with some surprise, he'd seen only as pictures in personnel files.

An Arabic man approached him, smiling widely. Connell remember the face, but couldn't place the name.

"Connell, it is so good to see you again," the man said. He seemed to want to extend his hand, but was unsure if that was the right thing to do. "It has been a very long time since I have seen you."

Achmed. His name was Achmed. Connell hadn't seen this man since... since... since the night Cori had died. Achmed had been at that fateful New Year's Eve party. In fact, before the party, he and Cori had gone out to dinner with Achmed and his wife. The four of them had been friends, and Connell hadn't spoken to the man once since that night. Connell remembered calls from Achmed, consolation cards, supporting emails—all of which he'd ignored.

"Achmed," Connell said. "It has been a long time. How is..." His voice trailed off. He couldn't remember her first name; he couldn't remember their last name, either.

"Rana is fine," Achmed said with an understanding smile. "We hope you are doing well."

"I'm fine," Connell said, perhaps a little too quickly.

Achmed nodded. That same understanding smile on his lips couldn't hide the sadness in his eyes. "I'd better get back to work. Angus is very demanding." Achmed turned and walked back to his station.

O'Doyle spotted Connell, smoothed out his uniform, and quickly walked over. Connell was grateful for the distraction. He hadn't known O'Doyle... *before*.

"How's everyone doing, O'Doyle?"

"Fine, Mr. Kirkland. People seem to be getting enough sleep, but Mr. Kool is a slave driver. He reminds me of my old drill sergeant."

"Dr. Kool is pushing them hard?"

"Nonstop," O'Doyle said. "Nothing they do satisfies him. He's tireless; he hasn't slept once in three days. Normally I'd be concerned by that, but look at him."

Angus stood on the other side of the large lab, oblivious to Connell. He moved like he was made of caffeine; fatigue found no purchase on his body.

"You call these results?" Angus said, practically screaming at a small, black-haired woman, a sheaf of computer printouts clutched in his hands. Connell vaguely remembered her name—Katerina something-or-other. He remembered hiring her shortly before Cori's death. Lab workers flinched every time Angus's arrogant, nasal voice exploded at the woman.

"I said, do you call these results, Katerina?"

The woman looked up fiercely, eyes on the point of tears. "I've double-checked the metallurgical analysis," she said, her tone full of defensive frustration. "It's consistent both times."

Angus threw the report. The pages spread out like a flock of birds, then fluttered to the ground. "Well do it again! That work isn't fit for an undergrad, for God's sake! Do it again! And make it quick—this repetitive work is making you fall behind."

"I'll bet he wins Mr. Congeniality," Connell said quietly.

"He picks on her the most," O'Doyle said. "I peeked at her files. She's got a 156 IQ. I wonder how Dr. Kool would treat a dumb old soldier like me if I worked under him?"

"You're not dumb, O'Doyle. And besides, you'd probably strangle him."

"No sir!" O'Doyle said. "I would never strangle him... I'd use a knife."

Connell laughed, and he was a little surprised to hear the sound escape his lips. He laughed so rarely that it sounded strange to him. O'Doyle was a damn good employee, a man who in two brief years had single-handedly turned EarthCore's security force from a joke into a unit that might be mistaken for a platoon of crack commandos. Connell felt confident knowing that O'Doyle would be one of the first at the Wah Wah site.

Connell walked toward Angus. O'Doyle trailed a step behind. Angus saw Connell coming. Surprise, then haughty anger, spread across his face. He straightened his lab coat. Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and Pigpen pins decorated his lapel.

"Well, if it isn't the king himself," Angus said. "Coming down to watch your lowly serfs toil?"

Connell stared at Angus, and wondered how anyone could work with this man and not punch him in the face.

"Dr. Kool, I hope you've got something for me other than a surly attitude."

Angus nodded, his wild red hair bobbing in time with the motion. "Randy Wright collected fascinating data from the Wah Wah site. We discovered one rather large anomaly of extremely dense material three miles underground. What is odd, however, is that we found none of the usual indicators of a large platinum deposit. With dust on the surface, such as Mr. McGuiness found, I expected to see some biogeochemical evidence of a deposit. The roots of some trees and plants gather elements from the ground and transmit them to the leaves. Juniper bushes, for example, which are common at the Wah Wah site, can send roots as far as a hundred and sixty feet below the surface."

"So you're saying you found nothing there?" Connell asked.

"Nothing," Angus said. "No biogeochemical evidence of anything but iron, let alone platinum or any other valuable mineral. And that corresponds with our other surveys that show no metallogenic evidence of a deposit."

"Metallogenic?"

"Various minerals in a given area can reveal probable locations of undiscovered deposits," Angus said. "We've found absolutely no elements commonly associated with a platinum deposit. In addition, we've seen no surface discolorations in flyovers. There are no surface traces of any kind, either for platinum itself or for metallogenic indicators."

"So you're saying that aside from the dust Mr. McGuiness found, there's no indication of a platinum deposit?"

"Not using traditional techniques," Angus said. "But we have some more information, mostly due to advanced tomographic techniques I've developed."

"Do you mean topographic?" O'Doyle asked.

Angus glared at the man with a look of contempt. "No, Mr. O'Doyle, I mean tomographic. Topography is mapping the surface. Tomography is mapping the ground itself, the shape and the contours of various substances and densities."

Connell longed to wipe that sneer from Angus's face. "Angus here is an expert on tomography. You're standing in the presence of greatness, Mr. O'Doyle."

"Gee, it's my lucky day," O'Doyle said flatly.

Angus ignored the remark. "Ground-penetrating radar, known simply as GPR, can map the contours of solid ground by sending radar waves into the earth and charting the time of their echo, much like you might use standard radar to locate a plane in the sky. Current GPR techniques only allow a maximum of a thousand-foot penetration below the surface. My new method, however, allows you to penetrate up to sixteen thousand feet—over three miles. That's *eight times* better than anyone else in the world, I'd like to note."

"Stick to the matter at hand, Dr. Kool," Connell said.

Angus turned to a computer terminal and called up a graphic of tightly packed vertical lines of varying height.

"This peak here is our anomalous dense area," Angus said, pointing to the longest line on the graphic. "Notice how much higher it is than everything else?"

That's because it's dense. Really dense, much more so than the surrounding rock, which indicates that if it's metal ore it's very high-grade."

"What do you mean 'if it's ore?'" Connell asked.

"Part of the problem is that we had a lot of noise in the signal, like very weak, very soft areas throughout the mountain. To bolster our data, we took geophone readings. We detonated high explosives throughout the area and took readings based on echoes. It's just like taking a CAT scan except we measure the travel time of the seismic waves resulting from the explosions rather than X rays sent through the patient. I combined this with the GPR readings to map the whole area."

Angus tapped the mouse and a three-dimensional picture appeared on the screen. The picture showed a solid green mass at the center, broken up in many places, but clearly oblong in shape. A bright yellow envelope surrounded the green mass. Faded yellow vein-like branches extended in all directions, but mostly up and away from the mass. Only one straight, thick yellow vein pointed down, protruding from the center of the green mass, until it fuzzed and faded to nothing. The picture gave the overall impression of a neon-green sea anemone in search of food, waving hundreds of thin yellow tendrils through the water.

Connell was used to seeing similar pictures, courtesy of Angus's cutting-edge talents, but normally a plethora of colors and shapes representing myriad rocks and minerals dotted the screen. Even the most concentrated deposit images showed at least a dozen significant changes in color. In addition to the map's apparent simplicity, he didn't recognize the sprawling yellow lines.

"This isn't what I'm used to seeing," Connell said. "Explain it."

"Well, the green is our baby," Angus said.

"But where are the other minerals?"

"There aren't any. That's what's so strange about all this. That mountain is a big, solid, worthless chunk of limestone. There's some low-grade iron ore, but that's it. I filtered it out of the map so we could really see what's there. All we have in there is limestone and the Dense Mass, which we think is all platinum ore."

"How big is this Dense Mass?"

"About four miles long, a bit over one mile wide."

Connell's eyebrows rose in amazement. "Just in one big chunk?"

"Just in one big chunk," Angus said. "I know it's weird, but it gets better. The yellow lines—the soft stuff I told you about—we know why it appears to be too soft to be rock. It's not rock, it's not anything. As near as I can tell, those are caves."

Connell stared at the map. The green area, which represented the four-mile-long Dense Mass, looked very small in comparison with the horde of yellow lines snaking across the screen. The map showed a depth of over three miles, and many of the yellow lines hovered near the bottom edge. Some of the yellow lines appeared to be very tiny, while others were thick and solid. Solid yellow blobs dotted the map, including the one that surrounded the long green shape.

"Just how deep is the Dense Mass?"

"The magic number is 16,000 feet," Angus said. "Just a hair under three miles."

"Is there anything else like this in the surrounding area?"

"Nothing that we've seen," Angus said.

"Does that strike you as strange?"

"The whole damn thing strikes me as strange. We've got a potential platinum deposit with no standard indicators that one should exist, and we've got what appears to be a world-record cave system."

"World record?" Connell said. "Just how big is it?"

"The caves near and surrounding the Dense Mass are unusually huge. To date, the largest individual cavern ever found, located in Nevada's Carlsbad Caverns, covers 14.67 square miles with a ceiling as high as 250 feet.

"These Dense Mass caverns are much bigger than that. There's one kidney-shaped cavern at the GPR's bottom-edge range that may be as big as twenty-five square miles, with a ceiling as high as a thousand feet or more. On top of that, the Dense Mass cavern itself is roughly another ten square miles. I've never seen anything like it—no one has. We've made one hell of a discovery here. So far, the longest known system is the Flint-Mammoth Caves in Kentucky with over three hundred miles of known tunnels. I estimate the Dense Mass cave system covers six hundred fifty miles of tunnels and about three hundred fifteen total square miles of cavern."

O'Doyle let out a long, low whistle of amazement. Angus merely nodded.

Connell looked away from the map. The large cave complex was interesting, but it wasn't the important thing. "I assume you've ordered a diamond-drill core sample?" A core sample was the only way to tell if the "Dense Mass," as Angus called it, was the real deal.

"It's on its way there now," Angus said.

"Excellent." Connell disliked Angus, but he had to admit the man was damn good at what he did. "Excellent work, Mr. Kool. Now I know why we pay you so goddamned much. Prepare to set up shop on-site. I've already sent a great deal of equipment there, including that experimental ruby-laser drill head of yours."

"You realize that no one has ever drilled a mine shaft that deep before," Angus said. "It's going to be one hell of an engineering project. The current world's record is just over two miles. That was engineered by Mack Hendricks for Euromine. He's the best there is. You want to go deeper than that, and you're going to need someone at the top of his game."

"I've got just the person in mind," Connell said. "You've got other things to worry about. Prepare a list of necessary equipment. I want you and whoever you need ready to do your thing in three days."

"Three days?" Angus said. "You want a functioning lab at the drill site in three days?"

"That's what I said, Dr. Kool. I want that core sample analyzed on-site. Can you do it?"

Angus only paused for a moment. "Of course I can do it."

Connell saw a gleam in Angus's eyes, a gleam he didn't like at all. Angus was probably dreaming spelunking dreams, planning on exploring the vast tunnels beneath that Wah Wah mountain. Connell knew he'd have to keep a close watch on Angus, keep a short leash to make sure the little genius didn't skip off to do some exploring. But such thoughts were premature, really, and nothing mattered until core sample results established the find's validity.

Connell turned and walked out of the lab. He still didn't have any real evidence, but his instincts told him that the Dense Mass could be pure platinum ore, a find so huge that the potential dollar figures staggered the imagination.

Angus watched Connell leave. His head spun with plans and preparations. Setting up a functioning lab in the middle of a veritable desert in three days would be horribly expensive and very difficult. He didn't care, he would find a way to get it done. He had to get it done. Having the lab on-site meant that his presence would be required for at least a month.

The second he'd seen the first computer pictures, the second the massive network of yellow lines danced across his screen, he knew he had to find a way to get to that site. Now Kirkland actually wanted him there. To Angus, the yellow lines were a far greater treasure than any platinum lode.

The yellow lines represented the largest cavern complex ever discovered—a spelunker's Mt. Everest. It was a sure thing that no human had ever explored three miles below the surface.

Angus Kool intended to be the first.

"Be careful," Sonny said. "It's a sharp sonofabitch."

Dr. Hector Rodriguez, Ph.D., lifted the heavy, double-crescent-shaped knife by the hole in its center. There really wasn't any other way to pick it up—the knife was edge all the way around, inside both crescents and on the outside curves as well. He could only fit two chubby fingers inside the ring. Almost as soon as he lifted it, he lost his tentative grip on the polished circle. The knife turned as it fell and grazed his index finger.

"Oh, my," Hector said, looking at the red rivulet cascading down his wrist. Blood drops splattered the layers of paper that covered his desktop. He grabbed a handful of Kleenex and squeezed it around his wound.

"Shit, Hec," Sonny said, standing and leaning forward. "You okay?"

"Oh sit down, Sonny," Hector said. "Just because I'm a professor doesn't mean I'm a wuss. It's just a little cut. I can't believe how sharp that thing is. What idiot would sharpen an artifact?"

"I don't think anyone sharpened it," Sonny said. "I don't think it's been touched since they put it in storage."

Hector let out a small *harrumph* of disbelief and looked at the knife sitting on his desktop. A smear of blood clung to the jagged edge.

"So you don't recognize it?" Sonny asked.

"I'm afraid not," Hector said. "I've never seen anything like it. And you're sure this came from our archives?"

"That's right. Just sittin' there as pretty as you please."

"Well, it's certainly unique." Hector's mind scrambled for some kind of intelligent explanation. He hoped his sweat didn't show—he considered Sonny an old friend, but that didn't mean he wanted to look like an idiot in front of the department's biggest patron.

They sat in Hector's tiny, disaster-area-messy office buried in the archaeology department's basement. Sonny's face was very familiar to the staff, who were always eager to provide him any help he requested. This time, however, Sonny

came in with another man, a dangerous-looking Asian with dark, piercing eyes and a false smile.

More important than the man, Sonny had brought the strange knife. Hector knew it looked familiar, but he couldn't place the odd shape. He talked without looking up from his slow examination of the artifact.

"How long has it been down in the archives?"

"Since 1942," Sonny said. "A graduate student apparently found it in an area I'm prospecting."

"How did you come across that information?"

"You people amaze me," Sonny said with a laugh. "Y'all don't even know what you've got around here. You've got more stuff in that library and that museum than you'll ever know, Hec."

"Tell me about it. Just not enough hours in the day, Sonny. I remember when—" Hector stopped in mid-sentence, the image of the knife finally crystallizing in his mind.

"You got something?"

"Yes, I think so," Hector said. He turned to the impossibly overstuffed bookshelves and rifled through reams of loose papers. "I recall that shape. A former BYU student found something similar. In the Andes, I think. A Dr. Veronica Reeves from the University of Michigan. I've got the article here somewhere. A blurb in *Scientific American*, I think." Hector sifted through his endless morass of papers, practically ignoring Sonny and Cho.

"I'll leave the knife here, Hec," Sonny said. "I'll call you later to see if you've found anything."

Hector stopped his search long enough to say good-bye, but Sonny and Cho hadn't even cleared the door before he was digging again. He knew it was there somewhere, where had he seen it? He moved stacks of papers from one place to another. It was like trying to clean up spilled water with an already-soaked paper towel.

Twenty minutes after Sonny and Cho left, Hector found the magazine in question. Dr. Reeves' Andes find wasn't some obscure article, and it wasn't in *Scientific American*. It was on the cover of National Geographic. Hector opened the magazine to the article and found the picture that had danced at the edge of his memory—the picture of the knife that looked identical to the one now sitting on his desk.

Hector picked up the phone and dialed an office in the biology department. It was answered by a man with a thick Indian accent.

"Dr. Haak speaking."

"Sanji, Hector Rodriguez in archaeology."

"Ah Hector! How can I help you this fine afternoon?"

"Are you still in contact with Veronica?"

"As well as can be. She is still up in the Andes. Not many phones there."

"Well, you better come over here right away. I think you're going to have to reach her immediately."

"I'll be right down."

Hector hung up and stared at the magazine, amazed he hadn't been able to recall it as soon as he'd seen the knife. After all, it wasn't every day that a BYU

graduate's work graced the cover of *National Geographic*. The article showed a chipped, crescent-shaped blade gleaming on a black velvet background. White letters read *Cerro Chaltel: forgotten underground metropolis*.

Chapter 9

August 12

Connell had been on hold for twenty minutes. It wasn't like he had anything better to do at 4 a.m. It was 11 a.m. on the other end of the phone. Just an hour before noon in the scorching heat of South Africa. Connell really didn't mind—he had to get this man, the one man who could pull the whole thing together, even if he had to get on a jet and fly to Capetown. If it came to that, fine, but Connell had a hunch he could knock the whole thing out without leaving his desk.

The phone crackled as someone picked up the distant receiver.

"Mack Hendricks speaking."

"Mack, Connell Kirkland here."

"The legendary Cutthroat. I've heard a lot about you. To what do I owe this privilege, Mr. Kirkland," His thick Australian accent made "Mr. Kirkland" sound like "Mistah Kehkklan."

"I want you to come work for me, Mack."

"You made me leave my dig for that? I'm kind of busy here, Mr. Kirkland."

"I need you on the next plane to Detroit."

Mack laughed a big, barking laugh. "Listen, I don't know how you do things in the States, but I don't just walk out on my employers. Now if you don't mind—"

Connell interrupted. "We're going *three miles* down, Mack."

A brief pause. "Did you say three miles?"

"That's right. And I want you because you're the best. But if you aren't in Detroit tomorrow, I go with choice number two. I know Klaus Honneger would love to shatter your record."

"Now hold on there!" Mack said, anger thick in his voice. "Honneger couldn't dig three miles if you gave him a two-mile head-start. I'm willing to listen, mate, but slow down! You haven't even given me a chance to think about this."

"And I'm not going to give you that chance," Connell said. "I'm in a bit of a hurry here. I'll have an engineer at that mine tomorrow, it's either you or Honneger."

"What the hell are you digging for?"

"I can't tell you that."

"So you want me to quit my job and fly to Detroit without knowing any details, or even knowing if you're just screwing with me?"

"Our jet will pick you up. Just get here. See what we've got, then you can quit. If you don't like it, we'll fly you back. Are you telling me it's not worth burning a few sick days just to find out if I'm for real?"

Another brief pause.

"Three miles, eh?"

"At least."

Mack sighed. "I can't believe I'm doing this, but I'll be there tomorrow, you pushy, arrogant bastard."

Connell smiled. "Our jet is already at Cape Town. Be on it in two hours."

At 5:33 p.m. Kayla Meyers finally hacked through EarthCore's computer-security programs and accessed the company's intranet. The company's security would keep most people out, even the best hackers in the world. But Kayla, former darling of the National Security Agency, was better than the best.

The NSA's mission revolved around protecting U.S. communications or intercepting foreign communications. The United States government had spent countless hours training her in COMSEC, which was military parlance for "communications security." Part of her job entailed making sure U.S. communications were free from the prying ears of foreign intelligence operations. The other end of the NSA mission was just the opposite, which was SIGINT, or "signals intelligence."

SIGINT involved intercepting messages from foreign governments and exploiting such information as needed for national security purposes. She'd been trained to pick off messages sent by phone, radio, microwave, laser, or—especially—computer. In addition to training her as a killer and an interrogator, the NSA had trained her to be a communications expert, an artist in data espionage, and a hacker extraordinaire.

Compared to the Kremlin's computer security, EarthCore really didn't pose that much opposition. Still, Connell spared no expense in keeping the company secure and hidden. EarthCore didn't even appear in some government databases. If someone in the company didn't *give* you a company phone number, you couldn't *find* one anywhere, in any directory or any database. Even the corporate headquarters were an unmarked suite in Detroit's Renaissance Building. Aside from the building managers and the people in the mail room, no one in the building even knew EarthCore existed.

She relaxed in her chair as she sifted through earthcore.biz's most confidential files. She didn't care about any of them—all she wanted was information on Connell's new project. But she found nothing on platinum, nothing on Sonny McGuinness, not even anything on Herbert Darker. It was as if the new project didn't officially exist.

Paranoid bastard, she thought. *Doesn't surprise me a bit, Connell. You don't trust anybody, do you?*

Connell had needed that information from Herbert Darker, needed it in case he had to put the screws to Sonny McGuinness. *A billion-dollar find*. If Connell wanted that site so badly, other companies would pay for that information. The South Africans, in particular, seemed to take it almost personally when platinum was discovered in other countries. If the site was as big as Darker said, it could potentially affect the worldwide supply of platinum, and hence the worldwide price. That was the kind of information companies would pay to know.

Acting on a hunch, she switched tactics and slipped into accounting's travel budgets. Any company's accounting files often provided a warehouse of knowledge if you knew what to look for, knowledge that few companies spent much effort

protecting. After all, who gives a crap if the competition sneaks a peek at your travel logs or your expense reports?

Kayla called up all purchase orders authorized by Connell in the past two weeks.

Bingo.

Over ten million dollars of state-of-the-art mining equipment told her she was on the right track, but that wasn't the real find. What finally made her smile was the \$356,312.35 paid in advance to Southern Air Freight of Phoenix.

She exited EarthCore's system, erasing all evidence of her presence, and quickly hacked into Southern Air Freight's system. Air Freight's computer system had off-the-shelf protection, and Kayla moved past that with ease. She called up the customer account for EarthCore. Southern's force of five freight helicopters was in the process of shuttling EarthCore's mining equipment from locations around the South to a road-less area in Utah. Kayla noted the delivery coordinates: 38 degrees, 15 minutes north latitude; 114 degrees, 37 minutes west longitude.

A spot in the Southern Wah Wah Mountains.

BOOK II

Camp.

Chapter 10

August 13

Randy Wright sat in the backseat, sweating like a pig. Despite the air conditioner's valiant efforts, a slimy film covered him from head to toe. He could almost hear the Land Rover's paint bubbling under the angry sun. They would be stopping soon, and they'd have to get out, an act his mind ranked as slightly more fun than having a wisdom tooth extracted.

He looked out the back window. Dust billowed up as if the Land Rover were a bi-wing crop duster, swooping in low over the ground to drop clouds of noxious pesticide. The view out the front wasn't much better—an endless vista of brown and yellow, dotted every now and then with scrub and other vegetation so tough it looked as if it would flourish on the surface of the moon.

He pushed his glasses into place for the hundredth time; the rough, catapulting ride had the frames constantly sliding down his sweat-slick nose. He didn't mind the constant bouncing in the seats, but this heat could suck the fun out of a clown.

The bumpy ride bounced Randy in all directions, but it didn't seem to bother the Rover's other occupants. The driver, a stocky, serious woman named Bertha Lybrand, seemed to take the bumps without notice. The big, blue-uniformed man on Randy's right was having no problems, but that was probably due to his size—it would take a wrecking ball to move Patrick O'Doyle.

Lybrand was also dressed in the blue EarthCore security uniform. She was a big brunette, a strong woman, probably a bodybuilder by the looks of it. Angus referred to her as a “linebacker factory” and a “gorilla with tits.” He said these things very quietly, of course, and only when Lybrand was not around.

O'Doyle kept staring at her, turning away quickly every time she flashed a glance at the rearview mirror. Randy wasn't sure, but he thought O'Doyle blushed once when she caught him staring.

O'Doyle was supposed to be security. He was more like a prison guard. Nobody had been able to leave the lab even to take a piss without first clearing it with O'Doyle, and now he was in charge of camp security. O'Doyle had an aura of confidence and lethality that gave Randy the creeps (of course, the missing ear and accompanying scar tissue added to that feeling). Rumor was that O'Doyle had served in some secret Marine infiltration unit. Rumor also had it he'd once killed

five men with his bare hands. Looking at the big man, it was easy to understand why no one in the lab dared voice a complaint about the extra security measures.

It wasn't just the temperature that had Randy chafing at the trip, it was also Angus. His best friend leaned forward in the front passenger seat, oblivious to the heat and the jarring ride. Angus seemed to vibrate with energy, eyes wide and drinking in the bland landscape that stretched out before the Land Rover. Randy would have felt better if Angus had been just a little bit miserable, but nothing seemed to faze the man.

Randy longed for a beer, but there were certainly no bars around. They'd been driving for over thirty minutes with this knotted two-track the only excuse for a road. They'd passed tiny Milford—the last town they'd seen—over an hour ago, and they still had fifteen minutes to go to reach the EarthCore camp.

Aside from the heat, two thoughts dominated his mind: the sprawling, virgin cave system, and the stunning amount of raw treasure it likely contained. The rough, low-end estimate was over one million tons of ore, with a probable yield of twelve ounces platinum to the ton. Over \$10 billion at a price of \$850 per ounce. And that was the *low-end* figure. High-end? Optimistic figures held well more than twelve ounces per ton of ore—more like sixty ounces per ton, and the find was better estimated at around five million tons. High-end estimates teetered around \$255 *billion*.

Those numbers would rock the worldwide platinum market. Connell had worked overtime to keep the mine a secret and ascertain its worth as soon as possible—the last thing he wanted was the competition trying some underhanded trick to sabotage the mine. Connell had officially registered the Wah Wah site as a coal mine.

Randy didn't care that much about the money, although his profit-sharing plan would probably make him a millionaire. The tunnels were the exciting part. The largest complex known to man, and he and Angus would be the first people to set foot in it. That promised an adrenaline rush that would put a bungee jump to shame.

Once Angus had mapped the tunnels, he spent his time organizing equipment and drawing up schematics for vital new inventions. Putting those inventions together was left to Randy, who had scrambled to procure everything before they had flown out of Detroit Metro earlier that morning. The inventions—some conceived in a matter of hours—boggled Randy's imagination. Angus's short-but-brilliant scientific career had earned him a sizable fortune, huge gobs of which Randy used like a baited hook to make various technical firms put the equipment together on two days' notice.

All the little gadgets were packed into U.S. Marine combat webbing barely a half-inch deep. There wasn't a single piece of equipment that weighed over eight ounces. The whole rig weighed in at just over ten pounds. Tiny motion detectors, miniature floodlights, oxygen supplies, first-aid materials, vacuum-packed flotation devices, carbon-titanium alloy climbing gear, ultralight graphite-strand rope—it was more akin to Batman's utility belt than a spelunker's standard rig. How Angus planned on slipping away from Connell's watchful eye, Randy didn't know. If they did slip away, however, they'd be ready to explore like no one in history.

They would be the *first*. They would know the feelings of Columbus, Magellan, Armstrong, Lief Erickson. They would know what it was like to *discover* something no one had ever seen, something that essentially *wasn't there* before they found it.

There was power in discovery, a form of immortality. In this case, his immortality would be on a map—part of that subterranean maze would be forever known as Wright Cavern. That thought brought a smile to Randy's lips.

Chapter 11

August 15

Despite her position as team leader of a National Geographic Society expedition and her doctorate in archaeology, Dr. Veronica Reeves couldn't help squealing like a little girl when she heard his voice on the phone.

"Sanji! My God, it's good to hear you." She beamed with joy. She hadn't seen him in over a year, this man who'd raised her like his own daughter.

"Roni, my little darling!" Sanji said in his thick, singsong accent. "It has been so long since I have spoken to you. My goodness, it is hard to reach you in those mountains; I have been trying for days. Is the dig going well?"

She could almost see his smiling face—jovial under plump cheeks that less charitable people might call jowls—his black eyes, his skin the color of pale chocolate and his increasingly frost-speckled black hair.

"There aren't any phones up there," she said. "They had to call me down by radio. We're getting very deep into the caves, but we have to find a way to deal with the high temperatures down there. What was so urgent that you needed to talk to me about? I left the dig and spent an hour in a Jeep to reach a phone. Is something wrong?"

"I guess that depends on how you look at it. Things are very wrong if you are particularly fond of your current theory regarding the lost mountain city of Cerro Chaltel."

"What are you talking about?"

"They found a knife in Utah."

Veronica's jaw dropped. In the past seven years, the word *knife* had lost its conventional meaning; now she associated it only with the double-crescent weapons found scattered in and around Cerro Chaltel. The knives were evidence of a unique culture that possibly dominated the southern tip of the Andes around 5000 b.c.

"That's impossible," Veronica said.

"Come now, my little darling. I am sure I taught you a better scientific attitude than that."

"Are you sure it's the same?" She could scarcely believe her ears. The Cerro Chaltel knives were completely unique in all the world's history—a highly crafted platinum blade made at a time when humanity still struggled to master flint arrowheads. To hear one had popped up in Utah seemed unfathomable.

"I am holding it right now," Sanji said.

Her mind tried to deny the significance of such a find, to protect her from inevitable disappointment, and yet her excitement grew with each second. "It's got to be a fake, or one from here."

"Well, they would have had to fake it in 1942. It has been in the BYU archives all this time."

"Oh my God," Veronica said in a whisper.

Sanji laughed. "I thought that would be your reaction."

"Has anyone seen any glyphs?"

"I don't know," Sanji said. "All I know is that the knife came to our attention because of a prospector. We think someone may be preparing to mine the area."

Veronica's blood simultaneously chilled and boiled. *Miners*. She hated that word, hated what those people could do to invaluable archaeological sites, not to mention the irreparable damage they inflicted on the environment.

"I'll be on the next flight out," she said. "I'll call with the details. I love you."

"I love you too, Roni," Sanji said, and hung up.

In conjunction with her own research, Sanji's knife had suddenly become—quite possibly—the archaeological find of the century. And some money-grubbing mining slime might ruin it all.

We'll see about that, Veronica thought. *We'll just see about that*.

Chapter 12

August 21

Connell arrived by helicopter. The landing pad was a small natural mesa almost a quarter-mile from the camp. The mesa stuck well out from the mountain, giving pilots plenty of error room.

The EarthCore camp sat on a plateau notched into the mountain, a natural formation that had been enlarged and leveled to create more room. Slanting walls of green limestone rose up on either side and behind. From the air, the camp looked like a tiny cork bobbing amid a frozen brown-green tidal wave.

It had been years since he'd actually been on-site at a dig. Since Cori's death, he'd run things from his Renaissance Center office. But this one was too big, just too damn big, to leave to chance. He'd hired the best in Mack Hendricks. Mack could run thing as he saw fit, but Connell had to be there, watching, monitoring, ready to solve any problem that might jeopardize this impossible find.

The rotor blades kicked up huge clouds of dust and sand as the helicopter touched down. Connell stepped off the chopper into this man-made windstorm, a handkerchief covering his mouth, his eyes squinting against the flying particles of dirt. A Jeep waited for him at the edge of the pad.

The chopper flew off, leaving expanding clouds of dust to swirl and stretch across the arid landscape. Mack waited for him in the open-top Jeep.

It somehow surprised Connell that Mack Hendricks fit every American's stereotype of Australian men—blond, square jaw, solid shoulders, the skin around his eyes wrinkled from constant laughter and too much time in the sun. He had a

genuine smile and looked like he could quickly acclimate himself to any social situation, whether it called for black-tie or biker jackets.

"G'day, Mr. Kirkland," Mack said cheerfully, the sun reflecting off his damp, smiling face. His tenor voice and Aussie accent rang through the now-quiet desert. "How was the flight in?"

Connell grimaced as he tried to work some dust out of his mouth. "I made it, that's how it was." He threw his briefcase and duffel bag into the back as he plunked down in the passenger seat. Out of the helicopter's air conditioning, the desert felt blowtorch-hot.

Mack gunned the engine; the Jeep shot down the narrow but well-constructed road connecting the landing pad and camp. Connell peeked over the open side; an almost straight vertical face of green rock fell away less than five feet to his left. He tried not to think about the jostling bumps caused by Mack's speedy and casual driving.

"How far have you got in the past week, Mr. Hendricks?"

"We're a hair over thirty-six hundred feet in the first three days of actual digging, but we're moving incredibly fast now that it's underway," Hendricks said. "Angus's laser drill head design is the most amazing thing I've ever seen. We're frigging *vaporizing* solid rock. I've never seen a shaft progress this fast. We're running three shifts and we're capable of more than two thousand feet a day."

"How far to the ore body?"

"We're eighty-four hundred feet from what Angus says should be the first large tunnel, which leads to a huge cavern. We have to do a small amount of blasting to reach that tunnel. After that first cavern, there's another tunnel branch that leads to the ore body. It's about fifty-two hundred vertical feet from the planned shaft bottom, but we'll be following horizontal tunnels so it's more like ten miles of rough walking and some crawling. I figure with all the switchbacks in the caverns it's at least a day's hike from the shaft bottom to the Dense Mass. We'll be under for quite a while."

A day there and a day back. Two days underground just to see the Dense Mass. The time estimate gave Connell a true appreciation for the size of the cavern complex.

Even though the camp was a good half-mile southwest of the dig, mining noise reached Connell's ears clearly as the Jeep pulled to a stop. The camp's efficient, secure appearance pleased him. Head-high rolls of razor wire surrounded the perimeter, leaving one gate pointed downslope toward the desert, and another upslope pointed toward the mine. Four small Quonset huts housed camp staff: one for the mining crew, one for security, one for male staff and one for female staff. Large canvas tents were pitched over the Quonsets to keep sunlight off the corrugated metal. A larger Quonset hut, the size of a small airplane hangar, housed vehicles and large equipment. A sixth hut served as the mess hall.

The lab was the only building with real walls. It glared a blinding white in the late afternoon sun. A typical construction-site trailer near the lab served as the administrative shack. Sweaty people bustled through the sandy camp. The air was filled with pulsating sounds from the large diesel generator that powered the pump pushing fresh air into the shaft and provided the camp with electricity. Opposite

the hangar/garage sat a 10,000-gallon diesel fuel tank, its long, round body oddly calling to mind a plastic submarine marooned in the desert.

"Very nice, Mr. Hendricks, very efficient," Connell said as he exited the Jeep and headed straight for the lab.

The lab's interior seemed as icy cold as the desert was scalding hot. The sudden temperature change made his head hurt almost instantly. The lab was a tiny maze of expensive, humming equipment. Connell recognized some of the equipment, although he couldn't begin to guess the purpose of most of it. Angus's wild, red-haired head popped up from underneath a machine. A smile broke over his small face. He hustled to his feet and over to greet Connell.

"Mr. Kirkland! I'm glad you made it out all right."

Connell stared at the smaller man for a second, surprised by the reaction. Angus seemed genuinely happy. *The little spelunker is already planning on traversing the caves*, Connell thought. *Got to keep a close eye on him.* Connell wasn't about to let anyone go near the caves until safety had been assured. Especially not Angus Kool.

"You seem in good spirits, Mr. Kool," Connell said, shaking the hand that was offered. "I assume we've got good news regarding the core sample?"

"It's amazing," Angus said. "It's even better than what we expected."

Angus reached into his pocket and produced a sealed foil envelope. It resembled a small condom wrapper. He opened it and pulled out a thin dot of metal the size of a watch battery.

"If you could turn around, Mr. Kirkland, I need to attach this."

"What is it?"

"It's a homing device I invented. I call it the Marco/Polo System. Mack asked me to set something up so we wouldn't lose anyone in the tunnels. I programmed this microtranceiver with your name. The finder unit—I call it a *Marco*—sends out a signal. Your unit receives the signal and responds with a message containing your name. Your unit is the 'Polo.' That way if you're lost or get injured or knocked out, search parties can locate you. The Marco unit detects body temperature, pulse, and Alpha waves along with distance and altitude."

"What's the range on it?"

"In open air it's a couple of miles," Angus said as he pressed the dot against the base of Connell's skull. "Underground, it depends on how much rock comes between you and the Marco unit. As long as no one tries to go off on his own, it's impossible to become completely lost. Everyone in camp has one, just in case." Angus removed his hand. Connell turned his head from side to side, but felt nothing.

"Did it fall off?"

"Nope, it's still there. It's attached with artificial skin that breathes just like the real thing. It will stay on until it's removed. Now take a look at this." Angus turned to a monitor, on which a spiky line showed a mass-spectrometer analysis.

"This whole line is a breakdown of the core sample's mass spec results," Angus said. "We took periodic samples every hundred feet down to sixteen thousand feet. That distance is, by the way, deeper than anyone has ever drilled in one shot, which gives me yet another world's record. Just thought you'd like to know."

"I'll be sure to call the Guinness people in the morning," Connell said.

"Now, you'll see the normal spikes for a very bland mineral content in this overall chart, but notice these three spikes here." Angus pointed to the three highest peaks, one that towered above the rest of the small points and dips, and another that reared almost as high. Connell noted a slew of peaks, under which he read compound names like $\text{KFe}_3(\text{SO}_4)_2(\text{OH})_6$ and $\text{Cu}_3(\text{AsO}_4)(\text{OH})$. The only compound he recognized, CaCO_3 —limestone—sat under the biggest peak. The second-highest peak read only Pt, and the third read $\text{Pt}_{60}\text{Ir}_{12}(\text{?})$.

"The whole mountain is basically Cretaceous-period limestone and limestone compounds. The second spike is a control sample of pure platinum, highly refined. This third spike—" Angus paused, smiled, and looked directly at Connell "—this third spike is a flake of what we found at 16,340 feet, the absolute bottom range of the drill sample."

Connell leaned in toward the screen, comparing the numbers on the second and third spikes. They looked nearly identical. "Mr. Kool," Connell said, managing to keep his voice and face neutral despite his smoldering excitement. "Are you telling me that your core sample came back with almost solid platinum?"

"Platinum-iridium."

"And where does this match up with your data on the Dense Mass inside the mountain?"

Angus turned to the keyboard and brought up the now-familiar schematic of the green solid mass and surrounding yellow tunnels. A dozen vertical red lines appeared surrounding the green mass. "We ran drilling and bulk sampling where you see all of the red lines. Eleven of the samples turned up nothing but worthless rock. Not a trace of platinum. Only one drill sample gave us the results I just showed you."

He tapped the mouse and another red line appeared, glowing bright orange where it intersected with the green mass. "Our baby is everything we thought it would be and then some," he said quietly, staring at the screen. "It's solid platinum. Solid as a fucking rock. I'm convinced the entire Dense Mass is of the same composition as our drill sample. It's a four-mile long, half-mile wide chunk of solid platinum."

Angus leaned back in his chair, his happy smile gone, the more familiar arrogant grin again at home on his face. "Sometimes," he said through the smile, "I amaze even myself."

"What's with the question mark?" Connell asked, pointing to the $\text{Pt}_{60}\text{Ir}_{12}(\text{?})$ symbol on the screen.

"Nothing to worry about," Angus said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "The platinum/iridium compound appears to be something uncalibrated on the SIMS."

"English, please," Connell said.

"Secondary Ion Mass Spectrometry. We bombard the target material with positively charged ions. The bombardment transfers that positive charge to the target material, which in this case is the material brought up by the core sample. That positive charge causes an atom to break free, causing fragmentation. Because fragmentation patterns are distinct and reproducible, we can precisely identify the trace elements of any solid material."

"If it's so precise, then why the question mark?"

"Because the platinum/iridium alloy is something nobody has ever seen before. In effect, the computer is taking an educated guess. The ion bombardment produces platinum and iridium atoms, and it's guessing at how those elements combine to form the compound. It's just an unusual compound, that's all."

"You're sure it's platinum, though, correct?" Connell was glad he'd made the trip out, elated that he was here as everything unfolded. "You're sure it's platinum?"

"As sure as I'm a flat-out genius," Angus said.

Connell's eyes remained fixed on the screen. Platinum never occurred naturally in a large solid mass, and yet there it was. A find so big, so massive, that EarthCore could dictate supply for at least the next thirty years, if not the entire twenty-first century. Billions of dollars. *Trillions* of dollars.

"Mr. Kool, I want two more drill samples at areas that will intersect your Dense Mass projections."

"No can do," Angus said. "Our drill bit was destroyed when we tried to core deeper into the Dense Mass."

"I thought that diamond bit could slice through anything."

"It can, but this platinum-iridium alloy is really hard, perhaps almost as hard as the diamond itself. We got a decent-sized sample, but the compound just ground the diamond bit down to nothing. There may be some serious commercial applications for this compound. It's very unusual. I wouldn't worry about it; we've gotten plenty of data and the shaft is already under way."

A multimillion-dollar piece of equipment destroyed, and Angus didn't bat an eye. It didn't surprise Connell in the least. But if Angus was satisfied that the Dense Mass was platinum, Connell also found it hard to care about the destroyed core sampler.

Connell walked into the administration shed and wearily shut the door behind him. Even his short time in the heat had drained his body. He needed a drink and a nap. He went to the desk that would be his home for at least the next two weeks. He pulled a framed picture from his briefcase.

He held the picture of his wife in his hands, staring down at her smiling face, feeling the familiar hurt worm its way through his insides. He set the picture on his desk so Cori's image could see everything he did.

From his duffel bag, he pulled out the blocky cellular phone provided by Kayla Meyers. It was black and heavy, with deep scratches on the side from a filed-down serial number. Kayla "acquired" this little toy as surplus from the American Embassy in Saudi Arabia, or so she said. Connell didn't really care, as long as it was secure.

The receiver was a twin of the one that Barbara Yakely had back in Detroit. Hers was the only phone that could decipher the scrambled signal sent out by Connell's, and vice-versa. He punched the connect button; Barbara answered almost immediately. Connell talked quietly and calmly, but had no way of knowing that his boss wasn't the only person to hear the conversation.

Kayla Meyers gently tweaked the controls of the Harris JM-251 receiver, specially modified for the NSA's SIGINT needs. She'd watched Connell ever since his arrival at camp, following his every move through high-powered binoculars as

she lay practically invisible in the sand. Once he'd headed for the administration shed, she knew he'd call Barbara Yakely.

The air conditioners peeking from every building in the camp made her want to laugh with contempt. She'd grown up in southern Texas; the scorching sun was an old, dear friend, and growing up dirt poor and isolated she'd had few friends.

Her father saw to that. Kayla and her two older sisters all suffered his abuse, his beatings, his touch. Mary and Shelly suffered the most, succumbing to his will, stepping and fetching whenever he walked in the room. They did anything to avoid a beating—or worse, the loving. When Kayla turned eight, or maybe nine, she couldn't remember, Cyrus Meyers came for her, too. Their tiny ranch perched in a solitary strand of barely arable farmland. No one ever heard the cries.

She could still hear his slurred words, his binge-drunk voice screaming at the top of his lungs as he lurched out of the rust-eaten Dodge longbed truck, bar smoke clinging to him like stink on road kill.

"Wake up, girls!" Cyrus would scream as his daughters cowered in terror. "Get your fingers out of the tuna bowl and come give yer daddy some biscuits 'n gravy!" He'd stumble into the house, barely able to walk, but somehow managing to find their beds. Cyrus didn't like to hear any noise when he visited them at night. The girls would choke back cries as tears trickled down their faces onto threadbare pillowcases bought by a mother Kayla had never known.

Mary and Shelly wordlessly suffered his touch, succumbing to his perverse will. But Kayla was different. She'd always been different, preferring the boys' roughhouse schoolyard games over dolls and tea parties. Girls were weak. The boys were tougher.

For the five years that Cyrus molested her, sodomized her, beat her for reasons Kayla could never quite fathom, a quiet rage burned inside her. Fear and guilt dominated her sisters, which seemed to be exactly the emotions Cyrus wanted, but only seething anger mulled in Kayla's growing body. Cyrus knew it, too. Somehow he sensed it, sensed the rebellion in her soul. He tried again and again to beat that rebellion out of her, to break her spirit. She finally put a stop to Cyrus Meyers's twisted ways one god-awful hot July evening.

Cyrus had finished up with Mary and Shelly, knocking off a bottle of Night Train with each girl. As he popped open his third bottle, he came for Kayla. He had no way of knowing that while he molested his older daughters, his youngest had stolen into the kitchen and grabbed a rust-speckled butcher knife.

Cyrus came into her room, stinking, staggering, bragging. He was so drunk he could barely walk. She buried that rusty knife in his heart.

She was thirteen—it was her first murder. It sure as hell wasn't her last. As their father lay dead on the worn, yellow shag carpeting of Kayla's bedroom, Mary and Shelly didn't know what to do. The older sisters seemed caught between the violent horror of a murdered father and the unfathomable relief and freedom brought on by Kayla's brutal act. They didn't know what to think, so Kayla did their thinking for them. They spent an hour arranging things. Even then, at thirteen, Kayla possessed an uncanny knack in accounting for every detail.

The police came and all three girls gave a convincingly hysterical report of a burglary gone wrong. Kayla knew the cops saw right through her story—the Meyers family didn't have anything worth stealing.

Even the most stolid, diehard, live-by-the-law cops didn't pry into the matter. If Cyrus's constant, sickening treatment of his daughters finally got him killed by their hand, well, no one was going to miss him. If it was murder, it was something all four of the town policemen had thought of doing to Cyrus more than once when they saw the Meyers girls bandaged, bruised, and laid out in a bed at County General.

The murder faded away. Kayla lived with her sisters for five more years, graduated from high school, then joined the marines. There she excelled; her killer instinct was encouraged and honed. Ironically, she never got the chance to kill while in the Corps.

Killing came in spades after she was recruited by the NSA. Kayla was a marine with a spotless record, high recommendations from her superior officers, and an IQ of 130. She was exactly what they wanted: a brilliant, beautiful woman who showed no compulsions about killing for her country. Kayla's willingness to volunteer for any mission endeared her to superiors and moved her quickly up the field-agent ladder. No matter what the obstacles, she simply found a way to get the job done.

But that was back in her NSA days, back when she had a purpose in life, a reason for being other than just collecting a paycheck. It had all been about God & Country back then. She'd been damn good, perhaps even the best in the world. Too good, that was how she figured it. No boss, especially a political animal like NSA director André Vogel, liked having a clearly superior underling.

Vogel had fired her, humiliated her, humiliated a woman who had more honor than all the men in all the intelligence agencies combined. All because of one little "incident."

Like those piece of shit children would have ever amounted to anything anyway.

Kayla shook off the thoughts, she had more important things to worry about than her old glory days. She had to worry about a payday, and a great big payday it would be if she could get just a little more information out of Connell.

Kayla knew he would use the COMSEC equipment to talk to Detroit. The compact but heavy JM-251 Harris SIGINT pack was a bitch to haul on the ten-mile desert hike from her hidden Land Rover to her current hideaway, but with it she could pick off any communication coming in or going out of the camp.

Kayla had the handset's encryption key preprogrammed into the Harris unit's memory. Eavesdropping was a cakewalk.

Connell's voice sounded thin through the handset. "It's much bigger than we thought," he said.

"It better be, sweetie," a gravelly woman's voice answered. "This is the most expensive test site in the company's history."

"The core samples checked out better than we'd estimated."

"Better? Are you shitting me, honey?"

"No ma'am," Connell said. "And the deposit is far larger than we'd hoped."

"How big?"

"I can't say over this line."

Kayla growled low in her throat. She'd sold Connell this equipment—it was top of the line in security. He should feel completely safe using it, the paranoid bastard.

"Honey," the woman said quietly. "It's that big?"

"Yes ma'am, it is. I'll keep you updated."

"I'll be looking forward to it, sweetie." They both hung up.

Kayla felt her anger rise. Connell didn't trust the equipment. Did he think she was a fucking amateur? His paranoia—and his lack of trust in the state-of-the-art equipment—was nothing less than a personal insult.

She already knew of the mine's potential yield. The night after the workers finished assembling the administration trailer, she'd slipped in and bugged it. It was the camp's nerve center and in it she could hear every word spoken. She hadn't been able to bug the lab; security had been impenetrable around that building, even during construction.

O'Doyle's security measures were very good. She never thought he would turn out to haunt her like this. A little more than a year ago, Connell had come to her asking for a first-class security man, someone with military experience, the real deal. She'd hacked into Defense Department black files and discovered Patrick O'Doyle, a governmental assassin and killing machine who had recently been "retired" from service. She gave the info to Connell. He hired O'Doyle shortly after that.

The rest of the security staff wasn't up to his caliber, but they weren't pushovers, either. The guards, around twenty of them, carried M9 Berettas—9 x 19mm, fifteen-round magazine, semiautomatic. Dangerous weapons in the right hands.

The guards also had a dozen Heckler & Koch HK416 assault rifles stashed away. Knowing O'Doyle's record the way she did, the H&Ks were probably rigged for full automatic. You didn't even have to be remotely skilled to kill with a weapon like that—you just pointed and pulled the trigger. The weaponry didn't stop her from making nighttime forays into camp, but it did make her very, very cautious.

Powerful halogen lamps illuminated the large open spaces between camp buildings. That made it difficult to move unseen. She'd managed, spending as long as twenty-five minutes in one hiding place, watching the habits and patterns of the guards. They changed over every four hours—three hours into each shift was the best time to move. Kayla had already slipped in and out of camp each of the last two nights, careful to avoid moving during O'Doyle's shifts.

For the most part Kayla slept from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., with a few hours snatched here and there during the night. She had enough water and K-rations for two more days. After that, things would get a little dry up in her perch. She'd either have to hike back to her camouflaged Jeep and lose a day of observation, or steal supplies from the camp.

This was her ticket. This was it, the biggest platinum vein ever found. She'd already set her price tag at \$2 million, and that was just for information. If someone wanted to contract her to take some form of action, to sabotage the EarthCore mine, well, that would bring an additional hefty fee. Kayla knew the South African platinum consortium would fork over \$2 million in a heartbeat to learn of such a potential addition to platinum supply, and probably so would those underhanded bastards at Montana's Stillwater Mine. The Russians would balk at such a price tag for mere information. But while the South Africans

probably just wanted the info, the ruthless Russians had no compunction about playing dirty pool.

She still needed additional information. She had to make sure that if she dangled this carrot in front of potential customers, they would take it right away. She had to create a sense of panic about their business, without giving any hints to the location of the EarthCore mine, or even that EarthCore was involved. She had to deliver a complete information package, so they would be too afraid of waiting another two or three months to gather the information on their own.

Depending on how Connell wanted to play it, EarthCore could potentially try and grab immediate profits by flooding the market with platinum. That large of an increase in supply might drive down platinum's price from over \$850 an ounce to maybe \$450, possibly even less. That would mean hundreds of millions in lost profits to the other players in the platinum market. If she could get some info, even an inkling, of how Connell planned to play this hand, her information-selling price could go even higher.

Kayla was no master of economics, but she didn't have to be—all she had to do was gather the information and sell it to the highest bidder.

Besides, there was something about the situation that intrigued her. Much of that something was a deliciously dark feeling that seemed to pulse from the mountain. She'd never felt anything close to it.

And she liked it.

Chapter 13

August 22

Instead of shades of green and a wet, sauna-like atmosphere, the landscape revealed sharply cut browns and almost zero humidity. Heat was heat, however, and Dr. Veronica Reeves felt right at home. She ought to feel at home, she thought, seeing as she'd grown up rather close to this barren place. She endured the jostling of the so-called road as it wound its way toward the EarthCore mining camp.

A sweaty, dirty, wide-brimmed straw hat perched tightly on top of her severe ponytail. She always wore her hair that way, and yet she could never control the wispy blond tufts that pulled free seemingly of their own accord.

Pure excitement had her squirming in the seat of Sanji's beat-up Toyota Rav4. She'd seen the knife only minutes after Sanji greeted her with a big, crushing hug. It was the same hug he gave her every time she returned to BYU to visit him (which, she reminded herself sternly, was far too rare an occurrence). It was a hug that made everything right, a hug that said *I'm always here for you*. The first time she'd felt that hug, felt that unspoken promise of infinite support, had been at the age of five when her parents died.

Both of her parents, like her, had been only children. When a plane crash took them away from her, she had no aunts, no uncles, and no grandparents. She did, however, have Sanji.

Her father, also a biologist, had worked closely with Sanji for years. Both were faculty members at BYU, and as far back as she could remember Sanji had been a part of the family in all but name. Her parents' will named Sanji as her legal guardian, a responsibility he honored. It was a debt of friendship he treasured more than his own life. She often wished she could have known her parents, known what kind of people they were to instill that level of loyalty in their friends.

Sanji proved as good a father as any little girl could ask for. With no family of his own, he doted on her. She grew up deeply loved and cared for, encouraged in everything she did, every dream she chased. He urged her to pursue a doctorate at the University of Michigan. On a professor's salary, he found money to send her anywhere her research demanded: the Yucatan Peninsula, the Kirghiz Steppe, Toros Daglari. Even when she wanted to travel to Argentina to hunt platinum knives on the steep, jungle slopes of the Andes, he'd wholeheartedly urged her to go. He encouraged her knowing full well he would see her rarely, if at all.

And now he was by her side again, helping her chase those *same* knives in his own backyard. She'd barely believed his call. When she arrived at BYU, exhausted from the trip, she held the Utah knife and knew, instantly, that it was no hoax, no ruse, no mistake.

Cerro Chaltel's culture held a unique place in man's history. Unique up until they found the Utah knife, she reminded herself. A lost civilization more than nine thousand years old. A hidden city built inside a mountain, a city that she estimated had housed perhaps ten thousand people at the zenith of its power.

She'd discovered the culture while examining evidence of an ancient settlement, the remains of which told the story of a brutal massacre. Men, women, and children alike had been butchered and then buried along with most of their belongings.

Clothes, tools, pottery, even food—everything they owned, it seemed, buried right alongside them, as if the attackers despised every last trace of their victims. That part of the mystery had helped hook her, captivate her imagination. What could motivate an enemy to be so brutal, so thorough? Religion, most likely, but she still couldn't say for sure.

The burial preserved the essence of the site for millennia, until shifting erosion exposed the village. Veronica and her team excavated the site, gradually piecing together clues from the 7,500-year-old massacre.

The tools of this destruction were obvious—platinum knives of magnificent craftsmanship. At first they found only two tiny blade tips, broken off in the ancient victims' bones. Even from the small fragments, Veronica knew the knives were something very unusual. The pieces presented a technological mystery, a culture that had developed a high degree of metallurgy while the rest of South America's tribes were using flint and sharpened sticks. From the moment she saw the blade tips, Veronica was hooked. Careers were made on such tiny discoveries. *Legendary* careers.

She spent two years acclimating herself to the surrounding culture of the sparsely populated Cerro Chaltel, studying the mountain people, hunting for clues. Those people gradually accepted her presence. After some twenty-five months, a local man presented her with a gift—an unbroken crescent-shaped knife. That's when the mystery really got interesting.

A few scraps of rope tied through the knife's center ring were carbon dated at eight thousand years old. The pieces showed metalworking ability unheard of around 6000 b.c. The craftsmanship rivaled that of master weaponsmiths from Europe or feudal Japan. But those cultures flourished four thousand years after the estimated date of the massacred village. The crescent-shaped knives indicated a people vastly ahead of their time.

A series of caves sat only a mile from the massacre site, far up the slope of Cerro Chaltel, also known as Mt. Fitzroy. The crescent-shaped knife had been found inside that mountain's caves. The locals told her the mountain was cursed, and that only the bravest, most reckless youths visited the steamy slopes. Veronica, of course, paid little attention to such myths, other than to carefully document them for future reference. Alone, she sallied up the mountainside, into the caves, and into history. At the age of twenty-five, she had uncovered an ancient mystery that catapulted her to fame.

The caves turned out to be outlying branches of a massive subterranean complex that sprawled out for miles, both outward and downward. The complex ran deep. So deep, in fact, that the temperature in the lower regions made exploring nearly impossible. She'd been treated for heatstroke twice so far. Much of the complex had yet to be traversed.

While she and her subsequent staff (funded by a well-deserved grant) found no human remains and very few artifacts, evidence of an organized culture abounded. Specific caves within the complex held a few unique, crude glyphs and cave drawings, perfectly preserved through the centuries by the dry, windless caverns.

She had made significant progress on the glyph language. Many of the glyphs were recognizable: tribesmen with spears, many versions of the sun, insects and various animals, most notably bats. Most of the glyphs, however, were a language she had yet to crack. She knew that the pictures of the sun, suns of many colors, all with six rays radiating outward, were the most important part of the ancient language, and probably the entire culture as well.

One unique factor set the Cerro Chaltel language apart from any other ancient language she knew of—the use of color. Colors seemed to be as significant as the glyphs themselves; in fact they were part of the glyphs. It wasn't just a few browns and reds, but a full spectrum of colors with subtle shades and hues. The glyphs without color would be like written English without punctuation or spaces between words. She knew she'd crack the language, but had yet to find her Rosetta stone or anything that gave her a base from which to learn the language's rudimentary elements.

Carbon dating pegged the most recent cave artifacts at thirty-five hundred years old. She surmised the inhabitants had abandoned the city around that time, about 1450 b.c. and thought that they were possibly forced out by another culture. There wasn't enough evidence, however, to form a decent hypothesis about why the residents evacuated. There were no bodies, no burned remains, no bones of any kind.

Now, however, a clue had appeared, seven thousand miles away in the Utah badlands. The knife was unmistakable; there was no doubt of a close relation between Cerro Chaltel and Utah. She knew this because she'd never revealed the Argentinean knife's platinum composition.

Based on the metal alone, just one of the fifteen-pound knives was worth over \$200,000. Such figures would draw treasure seekers and grave robbers like flies to a rotting corpse. The caves would be defiled, priceless artifacts stolen or destroyed by ignorant, greedy hands. And even worse would be the mining companies, lobbying the Argentina government for mineral rights, tearing into the mountain with their explosives and strip mines and leaching compounds, turning the area into a wasteland. As far as the world knew, Cerro Chaltel's knives were a very early example of steel. Outside of herself, her staff, Sanji, and a handful of trusted scientists, no one knew the truth.

The possibility that her lost culture had reappeared in Southwest America astounded her. No, not reappeared; that wasn't quite right. Carbon-dating the few organic scraps remaining on the Utah knife showed it to be 6,500 years old. The knife, and therefore the culture, existed in Utah while the Cerro Chaltel site was probably at the peak of its power over the Tierra Del Fuego area.

The obvious possibility numbed her imagination—the two sites weren't independent; they were part of an empire, a culture that controlled an area from Tierra Del Fuego through Central America into the southern United States—an area that dwarfed the amount of land controlled during the height of the Roman Empire.

The words *Nobel Prize* rang loudly in her brain.

Veronica had no idea of how she would stop the mining outfit, but she wasn't going to sit around and figure out a plan while the company drilled away at history. She'd figure something out when she got there. The anxiety of the wait and the jolting ride didn't help. She knew one thing—she wouldn't want to be the man in charge when Dr. Veronica Reeves arrived, already pissed off and ready to pick a fight.

Connell sat in the air-conditioned office shack and listened to Mack finish up the day's progress report.

"Let me get this straight," Connell said. "You've done fifty-eight hundred feet in two days, and now you're telling me the last sixty-two hundred feet will take a week, maybe more? Bullshit, Mack. Unacceptable."

Mack glared at Connell. "The men are working overtime as it is, Mr. Kirkland. If they start to get careless, we're going to have accidents. I don't have accidents at my sites."

"It's not your site, it's mine," Connell said, pounding a fist on the desk. "A week is unacceptable. I want it done in three days. This operation is running way over budget, and we need to know what's down there."

"Somebody's going to get hurt!" Mack said, suddenly standing and leaning forward, fists on the desk. His head bobbed wildly with each word. "You know damn well this is dangerous work."

"I know it, you know it, and so do they," Connell said, gesturing in the direction of the mine. "They know what they're doing, that's why we're paying them double scale. If they can't handle the job, if they get hurt, that's not my fucking problem. Now I want that tunnel reached in three days. I advise you to shake your ass on out to the mine and get those men working harder."

Mack stood up straight and rigid. Cuts, scrapes, and scars covered his balled fists. Rage boiled off his face like a steam engine.

"People are right about you," Mack said quietly. "You are a heartless prick." He turned and stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him as loudly as he could.

Connell sat quietly in the sudden silence, feeling the weight of Mack's words. Maybe he was pushing too hard.

Maybe.

Connell wearily rubbed his eyes. He managed only about three hours of sleep a night. He slept on a cot in his office, away from the barracks, away from everyone else in the camp. He even ate his meals in the office, separate from the mess-tent laughter. Alone, he stumbled to his cot around two or three a.m. Sometimes he dreamed about Cori. Sometimes he didn't. Either way, good sleep was hard to come by.

The phone rang.

"Kirkland here."

"Mr. Kirkland, this is O'Doyle. I'm at the front gate. We need you out here immediately, sir."

"What's going on?"

"I'm afraid we have visitors."

Connell slammed down the phone. He seethed with annoyance as he left his air-conditioned office and ventured out into the frying-pan Utah afternoon and promptly began sweating like a whore in church. He saw the green Jeep and the security guards on the other side of the camp, just outside the main gate. Blinding flashes of sunlight glinted off the rolls of razor wire surrounding the camp's perimeter. A small group of staffers gathered around, watching the scene. He hurried across the compound.

Bertha Lybrand gripped a squirming woman in a tight hammerlock. A beat-up straw hat lay in the sand. The woman wore a ponytail, but that didn't stop clumps of her blond hair from sticking out in all directions.

The other trespasser, an overweight man, lay facedown on the hood of a RAV4, his hands cuffed behind him. He was almost as big as O'Doyle, but fat and out of shape. O'Doyle stood silent witness, smiling bemusedly, his pistol casually pointed to the ground.

"What's going on here, Mr. O'Doyle?" Connell said.

Lybrand answered the question. "These people tried to trespass, Mr. Kirkland. I told 'em to wait, but they insisted on coming in. I detained 'em until you could be notified."

"Are you in charge here?" the blond woman shouted. Connell looked at her face; beautiful but furrowed with fury.

"Yes ma'am. I'm Connell Kirkland."

"Then you tell this bitch to let us go, now! You're facing one hell of a lawsuit."

Lybrand tightened her grip. "Just calm down, ma'am. We'll get everything worked out."

Connell looked at the captive blond woman, staring at her for a few seconds before speaking.

"If Miss. Lybrand lets you go, you and your associate will behave as proper guests and will go nowhere without our permission," Connell said. "Is this acceptable?"

The woman glared at him with hatred and frustration. She was obviously used to getting her way, used to people meeting her demands. "Yes," she said, calming her voice, grimacing at the concession to Connell's authority. "We will respect your property. I only wanted to see the person who was in charge."

"Let them go," Connell said. Lybrand freed the woman, then carefully unlocked the man's handcuffs and helped him to a standing position. Connell noted a trickle of blood at the corner of the man's mouth. O'Doyle quietly holstered his Beretta, then handed Connell the keys to Sanji's RAV4.

"I do apologize for this treatment," Connell said, keeping his face blank. "But I'm sure Ms. Lybrand was very clear in her requests for you to stop. This is private property. Now, may I ask your business here?"

"I'm Dr. Veronica Reeves and this is my associate, Dr. Sanji Haak," Veronica said coolly as she straightened up her clothes and stooped to pick up her hat. "I'm from the University of Michigan, and Dr. Haak is from Brigham Young."

The credentials surprised Connell, but he didn't believe them just yet. If other mining companies knew how much money EarthCore was putting into this operation, they would do anything to find out what was going on. Connell had twice used Kayla in such an underhanded fashion, sending her to a rival company's site to get as much info as she could (the second time, unfortunately, had put the Crittenden Mines employee in a wheelchair.)

Reeves and Haak might indeed be professors, but until they proved it they remained spies in Connell's eyes.

"I'm here because you are mining at a site of great archaeological importance," Veronica said. "I want you to stop drilling until we can find out what's here."

Her bluntness surprised Connell. "I'm afraid that can't be done, Doctor. We have a very tight schedule to keep."

"You don't understand," Veronica said, urgency filling her words. "There's an underground city here somewhere, probably a large tunnel complex. It could be one of the earliest examples of human civilization."

How could she have known about the tunnels? Was there a leak? If so, Connell faced a brand-spanking-new set of major problems. He felt his anger rising. Outwardly, he showed no signs of his temper, but it dictated his actions.

"Dr. Reeves, I have already told you this is private property," Connell said. "You and your friend will leave immediately. If I have to, I will have Mr. O'Doyle detain you until police can arrive, but I warn you that may take the better part of the day."

"Listen, Kirkland," Veronica said calmly, eyes narrowing to angry slits. "I'm a member of the National Geographic Society, and I have resources to draw on that will make your little corporate head spin. In six hours, I can have the governor of Utah on the phone. I'll tell him that you are knowingly despoiling a national treasure. Then I'll let the press know about this big-business land rape. Once the governor hears the press is on this, he'll be in your shorts like the sweat that's pouring down your back. Then I'll get the National Geographic Society's lawyers to throw every injunction and blocking measure they can think of your way. They've

dealt with your kind a thousand times. In ten hours the press will be swarming over this place and your cozy little hideaway will be national news. You do realize the governor can delay your operations immediately, don't you? Of course you do, it's your business to know such things. In fourteen hours—"

"Enough," Connell said, interrupting her. This woman was more than he'd bargained for. If she could do half the things she claimed, she could delay the operation for weeks. Connell didn't have weeks. If word got out about the operation, the complications would be endless. He smiled, not for effect this time, but as a reaction. He rarely found people who could back him down.

"That's quite enough, Dr. Reeves," Connell said. "If you and Dr. Haak would be so kind as to come to my office, we can discuss the situation further."

Veronica, suddenly grateful for Connell's hospitality, gave him a winning smile.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Kirkland," she said. "That's all I wanted in the first place."

Once he had his guests inside his office, Connell immediately checked their credentials. He called the EarthCore offices in Detroit and had people contact the various universities, then hung up and waited for confirmation.

"Don't trust us, Kirkland?" Veronica asked.

"No, I don't. Don't take it personally; I don't trust anyone."

Veronica leaned forward, elbows on the desk, staring at him with piercing eyes. Connell noticed that Dr. Haak simply sat back in his chair, his big body relaxing in the air-conditioned comfort. He dabbed at his cut lip with a handkerchief, but made no complaint. He seemed quite content to let Dr. Reeves handle the conversation.

"You must be onto something very big to be this paranoid," Veronica said. "I think that one guard was prepared to shoot us."

"He was," Connell said. "And he still is. What's going on here is private business, Dr. Reeves—"

She cut him off with a wave. "I don't want to know and I don't care, Kirkland." Her curt use of his last name annoyed him. "What I do care about is that this area could be vital to human history. Your mining might destroy artifacts that could rewrite the way we look at ourselves."

She pulled a flat leather bundle from inside her pant leg. She set it on his desk and unwrapped it, revealing a long, wicked, crescent-shaped knife. Connell would have to talk to O'Doyle—allowing guests to bring fourteen-inch knives into his office didn't speak well for security measures.

"This was found on that peak," Veronica said, gesturing to the mountain that surrounded the camp. He carefully held it, surprised by its considerable weight. It was far too heavy for steel. The weight—and the mere fact that she was trying to stop him from digging—told him instantly that the knife was platinum. He looked it over, fingering the strange central ring, testing the blade's edge with his thumb. It was incredibly sharp. A sinking feeling seeped into his chest when he recognized it as an example of the knife Sonny had written about in the Wah Wah research reports.

Connell looked Veronica in the eye. "We haven't found anything like this."

Sanji finally spoke up in a thick Indian accent. "Sonny McGuinness discovered it in the Brigham Young University archives," he said, his jowls jiggling with every

syllable. "He brought it to Hector Rodriguez, who is a professor at BYU. Professor Rodriguez contacted me, and I contacted Dr. Reeves, who is the premier expert in this field."

Connell fumed inwardly. That little bastard Sonny should have never gone outside the company. It was exactly the kind of fuckup Connell had desperately tried to avoid by sending Cho.

"There's a great deal of importance attached to that knife," Veronica said, pulling a second leather-wrapped knife from her other pant leg. "And to this one as well."

A pair of fourteen-inch knives. He was going to kill O'Doyle. Reeves might as well have had a Howitzer stuffed in her sock, for all the care his people took to frisk for weapons. Connell set the knives side by side. They looked identical.

"I found the second knife on Cerro Chaltel, a mountain in the Andes range in Argentina. I've worked there for the past seven years on an archaeological dig. The knife comes from a lost city that may have dominated the Tierra Del Fuego area some nine thousand years ago. You see the similarity of the knives. There are only two logical conclusions.

"The first is that seventy-five hundred years ago, someone carried a knife from Cerro Chaltel to this distant peak in Utah, a trip of some seven thousand linear miles, where it lay in a tunnel for several millennia, waiting for some geology student to find it.

"The other conclusion makes more sense and also is harder to believe. There is an underground city in this mountain belonging to the same culture as we found at Cerro Chaltel. Probably, judging from the carbon dating of these two knives and their identical workmanship, the cities are part of the same culture. A kingdom that spanned two continents and constitutes the largest pre-modern empire in history."

Veronica's eyes flashed with unbridled excitement, her voice an open book to her emotions. Connell felt a pang of attraction, one that he quickly put in its proper place by glancing at the picture of his wife.

"If there's a city here, there will be tunnels in that mountain," Veronica continued. "A lot of tunnels. You haven't found any tunnels, have you Kirkland?"

"Please, call me Connell, I—"

The phone beeped. Connell smiled apologetically as he answered.

"Kirkland here."

"Hello, honey," Barbara Yakely said. The fact that she'd taken the time to call him meant it was serious. "Good news and bad news. Good news is they check out fine with their respective universities."

Connell breathed a sigh of relief. Veronica and Sanji were for real, which hopefully meant the platinum remained a secret. At least for the moment.

"The bad news?"

"Reeves is a big name. I don't suppose you read *National Geographic*, but her work was on the cover three years ago. She's been on PBS, the Discovery Channel, and in just about every major scientific magazine. The woman can bring loads of heat down on us if she thinks you're disturbing an important area. She shut down a mine in the Tierra Del Fuego region through political pressure."

Connell's mind whirled with possibilities. Reeves could make good on her threats. That changed everything. He simply couldn't have her talking to the press. "Thanks, Barbara," Connell said quickly, then hung up. He looked at Reeves, who beamed at him with a haughty, victorious smile.

"Good news from home, I hope?"

Connell grew increasingly annoyed by her attitude. He hated to lose. But the fact remained that she held the upper hand. He needed to keep her in camp. There were only two ways to do that, and kidnapping was one dirty trick to which even he wouldn't stoop.

What's your button, Dr. Reeves? What will make you play along?

"Doctors," Connell said, switching to a smile and a warm voice. "I'm in a bit of a predicament here. EarthCore doesn't want to disturb a site of this importance, but we have certain financial obligations to the stockholders, not to mention the amount of time and money we've already invested here."

Veronica's smile turned into a sneer. She'd obviously heard all this before, and heart-wrenching tales of financial despair from a Fortune 500 company weren't going to win her over. Sanji continued to lean back in his chair, watching the mental tennis match. Connell opted for the direct approach.

"We can't stop mining, but to be honest, we don't want the kind of bad publicity you can bring down on us. I know you might be able to shut us down, at least for a while. I won't kid you—I don't really give a rat's ass about your lost culture or your lost city. All I care about is the mine." Connell saw her expression change. She appeared surprised by his overtness.

"So," he continued, "I'm going to bribe you. EarthCore will cover all expenses for your research here and provide you with whatever equipment you need. In addition, anything unusual we find while mining will be immediately brought to your attention. I offer this, because as part of the deal, you can't bring in any outside people."

Veronica stood up angrily, ready to lay into Connell. He cut off her outburst with a pleading look.

"Please, Doctor Reeves, hear me out. I'm sure that a dig of this nature requires a large staff, but I have matters of secrecy to attend to. I'll make sure you have as many people as you need, but we can't have any outsiders in here. We've reported this as a coal mine test site when we're actually looking for platinum. We can't afford attention. In order to avoid that attention and keep you quiet, you'll have full access to our research. Not only will that make your job easier, but you'll know what we know. There's no way we'll be able to hide anything from you.

"In addition, we've developed several advances in technology that put us far ahead of current academic standards. All I'm asking is that you take a look at the facilities and tools I'm offering."

Veronica looked skeptical, but he had piqued her interest. He knew most archaeologists worked with paltry budgets and were often years behind the technology of the private sector. He was offering her state-of-the-art technology and an open checkbook.

"The last condition of this deal is that neither one of you may leave the camp for at least seven days. You're not a prisoner, but you can't leave during that time,

and we'll have to monitor all outside calls. After the seven days, we can renegotiate your need to leave the camp."

Veronica looked at Sanji. He shrugged. She turned back to Connell.

"We'll take a look at your equipment, but I'm not promising anything. And if we do go for your little deal, which I doubt, you'll have to put it all in writing."

"Of course, Doctor Reeves."

"Call me Veronica."

"Not yet," Connell said. "We keep all vehicle keys locked up in the garage, and if you decide to take me up on my offer, that's where they will stay. No one leaves without my permission."

Thirty minutes later, after a trip to the lab and examination of Angus's mobile GPR equipment, Veronica eagerly accepted the deal. Internally, Connell relaxed. He'd bought himself at least seven more days of privacy. Mack was pushing everyone with triple shifts. Hopefully they'd hit the tunnels within three days and reach the Dense Mass within four.

He was close. He wasn't going to let anyone stop him.

Bertha Lybrand sat in the cafeteria Quonset's air-conditioned comfort, poking at her can of Pepsi. O'Doyle sat across from her, staring at the table, toying with his own can. Their shift had just ended, and besides two other guards, they had the mess hut to themselves. She wasn't going to take any shit for this, no way, not when that blond bitch had it coming.

Lybrand spoke, her animated New Jersey accent betraying her annoyance. "If you wanted to reprimand me for how I handled the trespassers, you could have done it out there. You don't need to coddle me, sir."

"No! That's not it," O'Doyle said. "I... I wanted to compliment you on that. I liked the way you took the fat man out first and then detained the woman. You negated the obvious primary source of danger. Really nice work."

"Thanks," she said guardedly, staring at the faded eagle tattoos on O'Doyle's left forearm. Another tattoo, a brighter one, graced the bulging biceps of his right arm. It was mostly obscured by his blue uniform sleeve. Lybrand thought it looked like a blue flag with a horizontal white stripe—possibly the Argentinean flag, but she wasn't sure.

"So if you're not pissed, then what's this about?"

O'Doyle cleared his throat. "I... uh... I don't know. You've only been with the company a couple of months. I thought we could talk. You know, swap war stories."

"War stories? I'm not too hip on those, you know? I'm not too good at that soldier-to-soldier stuff."

O'Doyle shifted in his seat and wouldn't look her in the eye.

She didn't know him well, but she'd seen enough of his take-charge attitude to recognize a change in behavior. She'd hired on with EarthCore back in March, working security for a northern California mine. Shit wages, but it was all she could get. Just over a month after she started, her boss told her to pack a bag. Singular—a bag. Some EarthCore employee computer scan turned up her desert military experience and days later she was helping set up base camp in the Wah

Wah Mountains. That desert experience was hard earned in the mountains of Afghanistan.

Although she had been under O'Doyle's command for only two weeks, she'd never seen him act like this, all nervous and fidgety. Rumor had it that he'd served in some secret unit, that he'd won the Bronze Star. She'd never seen him act like anything other than a professional soldier and all-around badass. Now he was sitting at the table, fidgeting like a shy high school boy trying to ask a girl on a date.

"Not really like one soldier to another," O'Doyle mumbled. "Maybe more—you know—like man to woman."

It was a question rather than a statement. Lybrand's eyes widened with surprise and understanding. She felt blood rush to her face. Patrick O'Doyle was interested in *her*. No one had been interested in her in *that* way since high school, and she hadn't been interested in anyone since she had killed those men in Afghanistan. But she was interested now. Very interested.

"That sounds cool," she said, her face hot and flushed.

"It's very unprofessional of me to discuss this with you," O'Doyle said, still staring at the table as if he couldn't look her in the eyes. "Just so you know I'm not one of those guys who expects you to be interested. I don't want to create any kind of sexual-harassment situation, considering I'm your boss and all."

Lybrand shook her head. "No, that's okay. I mean, don't worry about that. That's not my style. Just so long as whatever happens doesn't affect our working relationship. I've never asked anyone for favors, and I don't expect to start now."

O'Doyle nodded. "I understand."

Still red-faced, she smiled. She smiled despite her self-consciousness about her poorly spaced teeth, sweaty blue uniform, and muscle-bound body. Patrick didn't seem to notice those things.

He finally looked her in the eyes—and smiled back.

Chapter 14

August 23

Angus relished the relief brought by the night breeze. The moon hung in full splendor, turning a desolate, brown terrain into a silvery landscape of beauty and mystery. His soul felt at peace among the clean air and smooth winds.

He turned his attention back to the task at hand and activated his newest invention. The foot-tall, pyramid-shaped device contained a ten-pound rod that slammed into the dusty soil with an irregular rhythm. Dubbed a "thumper," the unit sent small seismic waves into the earth.

Angus checked the satellite feed to his laptop, read the location, and programmed it into the thumper. The thumper's small, green screen showed the input:—11375'22"lo, 3823'15"la, 1821m. He unplugged the cable connecting the thumper to the computer and tiny satellite dish.

He pulled another small machine from his pocket. It resembled a calculator with a spike protruding from the bottom. He called it a "locator." The sensitive receiver picked up the rhythms from the various thumpers, calculated the time difference between the signals, and used the differences to triangulate location. Angus pushed the locator's spike into the sand and waited. The locator's black display numbers showed clearly against the LCD screen's eerie green background.

The thumper unit he'd just programmed constituted one point of a large hexagon. Thumpers had already been placed at the other five points of the ten-mile-wide hex. He'd programmed the thumpers to go off at 3:00 a.m., 3:05 a.m., and at 3:10 a.m. in order to calibrate and test the entire system. He checked his watch; at exactly 3:00 a.m., the thumper's rod pounded a complex rhythm into the ground. The message was a simple binary language code—the same language used by computers—announcing the thumper's ID number and location coordinates. Binary translated easily to seismic signals; each thump was a tenth of a second long: one thump stood for a one, two thumps stood for a zero. Angus eagerly checked the receiver's screen, waiting for it to receive and process seismic signals from the six thumpers.

The locator's display flashed numbers—11375'22"lo, 3823'15"la, 1821m.

He pulled the receiver from the sand and sprinted away from the thumper. He ran hard, heading south and down the mountain slope, slowing four minutes later to push the locator spike back into the ground. He was too far from the thumper to hear it go off at 3:05 a.m., but the receiver picked up the tiny seismic vibrations. Angus smiled as the locator display read—11375'21"lo, 3823'15"la, 1784m.

It worked perfectly, giving longitude, latitude, and elevation in meters. Not really sensitive enough for close distance measuring, but then again, the area he and Randy were going to explore was over five miles in diameter and possibly three or more miles deep. With those distances, the new navigational system would prove to be very useful indeed.

Angus pulled a walkie-talkie from his webbing and checked his homemade scrambler. The scrambler changed the encryption sequence every ten seconds. Randy's walkie-talkie, fitted with an identical encryption pattern, was the only thing that could read the signal. The shifting encryption pattern was impossible to break, providing totally secure communication. Sometimes Angus amazed even himself.

"Woodstock, this is Snoopy, do you read?" Angus said quietly into the walkie-talkie. He couldn't help feeling a bit like James Bond.

The walkie-talkie squawked with Randy's mild voice. "Snoopy, this is Woodstock, I read you."

"What's your locator reading?"

"It reads minus-113 degrees, 75 minutes, 72 seconds longitude, 38 degrees, 29 minutes, 91 seconds latitude, 2,034 meters horizon."

Randy was reporting from his perch 250 feet up the mountain and over a mile away. Angus smiled; the system proved even more accurate than he'd hoped.

Each thumper was theoretically capable of sending signals through several miles of solid rock, more than enough to fix a location inside the deepest part of

the Wah Wah caves. As long as the locator read signals from at least two thumpers, it could calculate distance and give a coordinate.

Angus planned on being underground a long time. He wasn't taking any chances on getting lost. He needed accurate measurements to fully map the tunnel system.

He'd even accounted for EarthCore's seismometer, which recorded any seismic activity in the area. The staff would be in for a surprise when the machine cut out every six hours: a time conveniently coordinated with the automated thumper cycles. He couldn't have them picking up the thumper signals and coming out to investigate. Angus went so far as to reprogram the seismometer computer's boot-blocks with the precisely timed shutdown. By the time the staff brought the machine back up, the thumpers' noisy task would be finished.

"Woodstock, get back to the Dog House, Lucy's time is up soon."

"Got it Snoopy, on my way." Angus turned off the walkie-talkie and put it back in his belt. He threw the laptop in his backpack and headed for camp. They'd paid a guard to look the other way while they slipped in and out of camp, but the guard's shift would soon be over. Angus checked his watch—if Randy hurried, they'd be back in the lab with a few minutes to spare.

Angus's grin couldn't stop grinning. That idiot Kirkland had no idea what was going on under his nose. *No idea at all.* Angus had already stashed all their equipment and supplies inside the second entrance, the entrance he left off the maps and kept hidden from Connell. Now they had the thumper system working like a champ. The only thing left to do was sneak away and start the greatest spelunk in history.

Only one more piece remained in the master plan. The whole thing was proving laughably easy. They'd already finished the hard part of the plan; sneaking away every night for the last week, stashing supplies, and calibrating the thumper system.

The last part of the plan, however, had some *serious* style to it. Angus could hardly wait.

Kayla sat staring at the Harris JM-251 SIGINT unit, her fingers drumming a pattern on its rough, black casing.

"What the hell are you faggots up to?" She said quietly. For the fifth night in a row she'd picked off the walkie-talkie signals of Angus Kool and Randy Wright. Angus's little encryption pattern was cute, and actually pretty good for an amateur. But the key word was amateur. Kayla had broken the code within the first twenty minutes.

Snoopy and Woodstock? Oh please. They had little spy code names, for God's sakes. She wondered how Angus would act if she took the pliers to him and showed him some real spy techniques.

While their digitized code was easy enough to break, she still didn't know what, exactly, they were up to. They were testing underground mapping equipment, that much was clear. She figured they hoped to sneak away and start exploring the caves. But why were they skulking around so far up the mountain? What did they have up there? What were they looking for?

At first she'd pegged them for fags, out for a midnight hole-poke away from prying eyes and perky ears. Now she knew they were up to something secretive, something Connell wouldn't like.

Following them up the mountain would be a risk. Not that she couldn't track them effortlessly, but she didn't know the men and didn't know how they'd react if they heard some strange, small noise if she made a mistake. Odds were they'd never hear or see a thing, but she wasn't taking any chances that they'd run off and tell Patrick O'Doyle they thought someone was out there, out in the dark, watching them. All O'Doyle needed was an excuse to come looking, and he'd probably find some trace of her. After that, it would only be a matter of time until she'd have to leave.

But she grew more and more confident of the camp's daily schedule. Tomorrow, just after the mining crew came down from the shaft, she would go out to Angus and Randy's last known location and follow their path. She hoped to find their secret, then be back in her perch before the pair ventured out in the wee hours of the morning.

Sonny McGuinness sat cross-legged in the lab building's shadow, peacefully drinking in the night's splendor. He knew Angus and Randy would soon return.

He figured those boys were out to get a little piece of their own. They probably hoped to find a decent load of ore, then stash away the nuggets in the lab like squirrels preparing for winter.

But they still had to find a way to smuggle the ore out of camp. Sonny didn't have that problem. All he had to do was collect twenty or thirty pounds of the best ore he could get his hands on, hike a mile or two, then bury it. He could always come back in a year and dig it up again. Repeat that process as many times as he could, and he'd clear maybe three hundred pounds. From the amount of money EarthCore was throwing into the project, not to mention Connell's slave-driver pace, the ore must be high-grade indeed. Three-hundred pounds of ore might net Sonny an extra ten ounces of platinum, if he was lucky. At most, it would mean an extra \$85,000. Certainly worth losing a few hours sleep, and who knew how much more he could find?

Movement caught his eye. Through the silvery haze of moonlight, he saw Angus and Randy quietly slip by Cho Takachi. Sonny watched them approach the lab. They walked within ten feet of where he sat motionless in the shadows. They were quiet as mice, but once inside the lab he could hear them stifling giggles. They'd found something tonight, that was for damn sure.

Tomorrow night Sonny would find out what it was they had found. He stood and walked to Cho without a sound, moving across the sand like a desert whisper.

"What's your game, kiddo?"

Cho whipped around, eyes wide and pistol drawn.

"Sonny!" Cho said, lowering his gun. "You scared the piss out of me. How the hell did you get so close without me hearing you?"

"Old prospector's trick, kid. Maybe I'll teach you sometime." Sonny thumbed toward the lab. "What's your game with Huey and Dewey in there?"

"What game?" Cho said with an innocent face.

"Cut the act. I've been watchin' you for three nights, watchin' you let those two out of camp and back in again like you was a revolvin' door. Don't worry, I'm not gonna tell anyone."

Cho regarded Sonny for a moment, realizing he'd been caught red-handed. He holstered his gun and wiped his long black hair from his eyes. "All right," Cho said with a tone of defeat. "It's no big deal, they just pay me to look the other way when they sneak out during my shift. They always get back before my shift is over."

"You know where they're goin'?"

"Not a clue, old man. You can't blame a guy for making a little extra on the side, can you?" Cho flashed his most charming grin.

"Can't blame ya at all," Sonny said, strangely proud of Cho's capitalistic nature. "But tomorrow night I'm sneakin' out behind 'em. And I ain't payin' ya shit. That's the cost for keepin' my clam-taster shut about your little game. Deal?"

"Of course," Cho said, obviously relieved. "You think they're up to something?"

"Yep."

"Think I might cut in on the action with you?"

Cho seemed to care about little more than money. How he got it didn't seem to matter. Sonny had to admire that quality.

"Could be, rabbit," Sonny smiled. "Could be. I might have use for a strong back before all this is finished. See you tomorrow night." Sonny turned and walked to the Quonset hut, leaving Cho with visions of dollar signs dancing in his head.

Four hours after Angus and Randy returned to the lab, Veronica Reeves stared out at a sprawling view of the sun-baked desert. Her eyes only half registered the morning's stunning beauty. She was over a thousand feet up the mountain. The dry landscape spread out for miles before her, but all she could think about was the opportunity presented by the knife and EarthCore's endless arsenal of technology.

She'd simply died and gone to heaven. The University of Michigan ranked as one of the world's leading archaeological research centers. Technology-wise, she was usually blessed with the latest equipment. At least, she'd thought it was the latest equipment. The truth was that she'd been using stone-age garbage.

The best ground-penetrating radar equipment she'd ever heard of measured to depths of five hundred feet, and only then if the ground conditions were just right. Angus's portable GPR array penetrated over *three miles* down, regardless of the ground makeup. It was also more accurate than anything she'd ever seen, especially inside three hundred feet.

Angus's full-scale map of the area told her where to start. On it she found an area speckled with abnormalities. Dense objects starkly stood out against the backdrop of rock and dirt. That area on the map turned out to be a small natural plateau.

EarthCore guards hauled the GPR suite 4,450 feet up the mountain with little difficulty, setting up the equipment on the plateau. Connell insisted on providing physical labor—she and Sanji carried little more than personal items. The mountain towered over the Wah Wah valley, but the slope was gentle enough that they didn't need climbing gear.

"Roni," Sanji said. "Come here and take a look at this." She turned away from the stunning view back to the small plateau. Sanji crouched in front of a Sony monitor that displayed data from the GPR array. They'd swept the area only five minutes ago, and he watched as Angus's program compiled the data.

Sanji, who'd spent his career as a brilliant laboratory and field biologist, was digging in the dirt and obviously having the time of his life. The climb had taxed him (she needed to nag him about getting into shape), but the concept of digging up artifacts had him thoroughly excited.

She stepped around the equipment to stand behind him and look over his shoulder. The portable screen sat on a boulder. Sanji moved a mouse on a green EarthCore mousepad, which looked horribly out of place among the rocks and dirt. The image on the screen mirrored his movements. Veronica saw many bright, sharp-edged objects on the screen, set against a backdrop of brown.

"The computer takes common readings and cancels them out," Sanji said. His brilliant white teeth flashed in the desert sun. "Those signals are displayed as shades of brown. The yellow marks are anomalies. Angus programmed it to pay close attention to anything linear."

Veronica could scarcely believe her eyes. Hundreds of two-dimensional images appeared. Most were nothing more than a splotch of yellow, and yet she could clearly make out some objects: a human hip bone, a pan, a broken pickax, possibly half a crescent-shaped knife, even an old gun. The GPR screen created a road map of where to dig.

"This is amazing." She felt her pulse race. The edge of the GPR image showed a deep black that contrasted with the lighter brown surrounding the yellow artifacts. She pointed to the black edge. "What's that?"

"That is how this program displays undisturbed earth," Sanji said. "The brown represents disturbed earth, which is less dense than the black, undisturbed areas."

Black graced only the plateau's perimeter—most of what they now stood on showed signs of disturbance. She frowned, thinking of that first Cerro Chaltel site where she'd discovered the massacre's long-buried remains. She had a bad feeling that they had found something similar.

"Well it won't dig itself up," Veronica said. "Let's get started." Everyone in the party moved with purpose. The thrill of discovery poured from Veronica and Sanji like water from a fountain, infecting the EarthCore workers.

Fifteen minutes of digging confirmed her suspicions.

Chapter 15

August 24

Connell followed Mack around the mine, carefully echoing the Aussie's footsteps, ever conscious that a million tons of limestone hung over their heads. The poor lighting made walking difficult. The place amazed him. It had been a long

time since he'd actually been inside a mine, and he'd forgotten how detailed the process was.

Connell knew his job was little more than to find a site, find people, and fund the mine, sort of putting all those pieces together in a mixer and hitting purée. He was a paper pusher and a people manipulator. Although he excelled at those tasks, Connell held true admiration for the people who really made a mine happen; people like Mack.

Mack moved through the safe areas of the shaft, constantly turning to make sure Connell stayed close. Connell marveled at Mack's ease within the stone cavern's confines. It was little things, mostly; like how Mack didn't watch the ground, yet never stumbled on loose rock, or how Mack's hard hat stayed naturally plastered to his head while Connell's continually bobbed no matter how many times he adjusted it.

"Watch your step, Mr. Kirkland," Mack said, his voice echoing slightly off the rough stone walls. "We've got some poor footing here. The vertical shaft is just ahead."

Smells of oil and diesel fumes filled the long tunnel. A long horizontal shaft—known as an adit—separated the tunnel entrance and the vertical shaft. The adit sat about seventy-five yards from the camp, and about forty feet higher in elevation, making for a fairly demanding incline to reach the mine.

Squat diesel tractors, designed for mines and less than four feet tall from ground to the cab top, hauled loose rock, equipment, and supplies to and from the vertical shaft. Mack had planned the shaft to come very close to a natural tunnel. Once at that level, another short horizontal dig would let the miners enter the massive subterranean complex that started over two miles below the surface.

The cavern surrounding the vertical shaft spread out before them. The cavern was big, but obviously crafted by a master. Everywhere Connell looked the walls allowed just enough room for the machinery installed within. There was little extra space. It reminded him of opening a walnut and seeing how the inside of the shell perfectly mirrored the contours of the nut.

"How deep is it?" Connell asked, his voice quiet and reverent.

"We've reached ten thousand feet; almost two miles," Mack said. "We'll be able to break into the tunnel system in one more day."

Connell peeked over the edge. Powerful lights burned every hundred feet down the shaft's length, a glowing line of giant pearls reaching farther than he could see. The shaft was just wide enough for the massive 17-foot by 17-foot freight elevator. The elevator's giant winch mechanism perched black and spiderlike over the mouth. Connell looked up at it, amazed at impossibly thick spools of inch-thick steel cable, spools that were bigger than a semi truck. They had to be that big to lower the 300-square-foot platform to the shaft bottom. A large swivel crane could swing the elevator platform clear, allowing the laser drill head to descend on the same cable.

Angus's invention utilized a pulsed plasma laser array to drill a perfect twelve-foot diameter ring. The array looked like a giant lawnmower blade, twenty-four feet long with a huge rotor in the middle. The twelve-foot-long "blades" held 144 laser heads, each with a beam radius of one inch. Behind the blades sat a long, liquid-ring vacuum pump (yet another of Angus's creations). The rotor spun the blade,

the lasers fired in a computer-controlled sequence that vaporized the rock in a perfectly level pattern, and the vacuum instantly sucked up the vaporized limestone before it could damage the laser array.

The end result? A perfectly round shaft with sides as smooth as poured concrete.

Mack's walkie-talkie squawked harshly, speaking a garbled version of his name between bursts of white noise. He pulled it out of his belt and thumbed the send button.

"Hendricks here."

"Mack, is Mr. Kirkland with you?" the voice squawked

"Yes he is, Jerry. What's up?"

"You'd both better get back to camp fast," said the static-laden voice. "There's been an accident at the lab. Mr. Kool is hurt; so is Mr. Wright."

It was different this time. And not just from the bodies. It was this mountain. It had a feeling, perhaps an *emotion* all its own. A dark emotion, one that draped over the sprawling rocks and sand as a shroud drapes over the face of a corpse. Veronica had felt it right off the bat, but mentally drowned it out in favor of the feverish excitement of exploration. Now, however, the sweet taste of discovery soured in light of their recent find, allowing the dark, creeping, tickling emotion to crawl to the forefront.

Mass graves were nothing new to her. They dotted Cerro Chaltel like a giant case of measles. Five times Veronica had excavated such sites of violence and death. Many were far worse in scope than the Wah Wah—but this time it affected her in a way she'd never expected.

She was furious.

The Cerro Chaltel massacres were of a distant, exotic, ancient people. Primitive people who were dead thousands of years before modern civilization even began.

The remains of the destroyed camp she had just unearthed belonged to *Americans*. Her people. She now saw the Chaltelians in a different light—they were a violent, savage, ruthless tribe bent on murdering anything that crossed their path.

Once word of the mass grave filtered back to camp, Sonny McGuinness came on the run. Sonny helped examined the artifacts: a rusted pistol, a mining pan, and the termite-ridden remains of what he said was a sluice, used to wash valuable metal from plain old dirt. Sonny determined in all probability that the mass grave belonged to the Jebadaiah Jessup mining camp, a camp that had disappeared in 1865. Just 150 years ago.

The thought that descendants of her Cerro Chaltel culture roamed the plains and mountains of the Southwestern U.S. should have thrilled her beyond imagination. Instead, it bothered her. It even scared her a little. It all hit a bit too close to home. According to her findings, the Cerro Chaltel civilization had ended around 1500 b.c. If it was indeed descendants of the same culture that massacred Jessup's mining camp, then the Utah version of the Cerro Chaltel culture had existed right up through the turn of the century.

They were modern.

Or at least part of a modern age. By no stretch of the imagination could she call such an incredible display of savagery “modern.” Just as at the Argentinean sites, Chaltelians had cut the Jessup party to pieces. The longest human remain discovered thus far was a piece of femur just over eighteen inches. Veronica even found thin scraps of fabric around some of the bones. One tough leather shoe still surrounded a mummified foot.

They hadn't even been able to count the number of people murdered, although Sonny figured it to be eight, based on newspaper reports he'd studied earlier in the month. Sanji had struck on the idea of counting feet (they couldn't use heads—skulls were smashed into hundreds of pieces). So far they had twelve feet, seven left and five right. Body parts lay scattered everywhere. It was almost as if the attackers had carved up the bodies and made sport of their remains, tossing them back and forth until the plateau was covered with blood and bits of bone and savaged body parts.

Just like the massacres at Cerro Chaltel, all traces of the mining camp were buried a good six to ten feet underground. Sonny found the discovery mesmerizing.

"Sonofabitch," he'd said with awe and visible excitement. "Jessup didn't lie. The mine is right where he said it was. It was just buried. Sonofabitch." Veronica didn't share Sonny's elation over the discovery.

"Roni," Sanji called out, breaking her daze. "I found another foot. A right one, I think."

Veronica shuddered quietly, suddenly wishing—for the first time in her career—that she wasn't digging up the secrets of those long-dead and forgotten.

She wondered if perhaps forgotten is where the dead should stay.

Connell held on for dear life as Mack whipped the Jeep through the camp, shot up the trail to the landing pad, and skidded to a dusty halt only three feet from the cliff's edge. They both hopped out of the Jeep and sprinted to the helicopter, its long blades already spinning up to full speed and kicking up clouds of annoying dirt and grit.

O'Doyle and Cho finished loading Randy into the chopper, Angus was already inside. Both men had bloodstained white gauze wrapped around their heads and a few other places on their bodies. Angus had a huge, bruised goose-egg under his left eye. Neither man was conscious.

"What happened?" Connell shouted over the helicopter's roar.

"One of the lab machines blew up," Cho shouted back. "Rotary separator or something, it came off its axle and tore itself apart, they were both standing in front of it."

"Are they okay?"

Cho nodded. "They should be fine, but they both had head-wounds, and you don't screw with those. I'm sending them to Milford Valley Memorial Hospital for observation."

Connell hated to lose Angus and Randy for even a day, but Cho had been a doctor, and Connell wasn't about to argue with his expertise. They ran to the edge of the landing pad as the helicopter lifted off and headed west.

"Check out the accident, O'Doyle," Connell said. "See what you can find." He found it a bit too coincidental that a lab accident took out his top two scientists.

Maybe a rival company was on to them, trying to sabotage the camp and get to the Dense Mass from another entrance somewhere on the mountain.

And if that was the case, he was running out of time.

Kayla Meyers focused her binoculars, watching the helicopter head south. This place grew more interesting every second. A small blast had rocked the lab, followed by thin black smoke that seeped out the roof. The oriental guard rushed in immediately after the explosion. Lybrand was there seconds later.

Kayla slipped back into her tiny, camouflaged dugout and returned to cleaning her weapons. A cloth lay spread out on the sand, her Steyr GB-80 pistol on top of it, loaded and ready to go. She loved the weapon, mostly because it held eighteen rounds in the mag and one in the chamber for nineteen shots of 9 x 19mm stopping power. Her Israeli-made Galil ARM submachine gun lay in spotless, well-loved pieces on top of the cloth. She, like many others, considered it the best submachine gun in the world. Like the Steyr, she loved the Galil mostly for its ammo capacity—a fifty-round magazine of 45mm shells.

Her hands knew each of the weapon's pieces intimately. She paid close attention to the process, guarding against tiny grains of windblown sand. Couldn't take any chances on weapon reliability out here. She had a growing feeling the weapons would come into play before this little desert soap opera was over. She wouldn't mind using the weapons, not one bit.

She smiled as she finished assembling the spotless Galil ARM and popped in a fresh magazine. Her hands caressed the worn grip like a hand tenderly smoothing the small of an old lover's back. Her smile widened.

Nope. Wouldn't mind at all.

The setting sun dangled just above the horizon. Its molten orange color shrouded the mountain range with a thick, smoldering glow. After two hours of hunting, Sonny McGuinness finally found his prey. Angus and Randy knew nothing about covering their tracks. Sonny had found the secret spots, the hiding places, the hidden treasures of men who had mastered the desert (and who'd been dead a hundred years). Uncovering the footsteps of a pair of corn-cob-up-the-ass lab rats was a comparative cakewalk.

He stared in amazement at their secret. He had to hand it to the two little weasels. They'd found another way in. While the financial might of EarthCore struggled to sink a multimillion-dollar shaft, Angus Kool already had a way in—a way he kept to himself.

Like the loose fist of some stone giant, a small projection of greenish limestone camouflaged a clearing. Little more than a flat slab of rock, the small clearing protruded from the mountain, ending in a fifty-foot drop straight to a jagged outcropping below. Surrounded on three sides by large, weather-worn boulders, the tiny mesa offered a stunning view of the sprawling desert. At the back edge of the mesa sat a small, irregular, dark opening no more than two feet high and three feet wide. Above the entrance, Sonny spotted writing chiseled into the limestone. He read the small letters, and his blood ran cold.

S. Anderson, D. Nadia & W. Igoe Jr. 1942.

This was the place Anderson wrote about in his last report. This was his tunnel. This was where he'd found the platinum knife, probably where the three boys disappeared. A thin film of sweat beaded across Sonny's forehead, sweat not caused by the blistering heat.

The tiny tunnel entrance beckoned, taunting Sonny's curiosity like a grade-school bully. *Come on*, it seemed to chant. *Don't be a chicken. Don't you want to know what's in here, you cowardly sonofabitch?* Sonny wanted to know—perhaps *had* to know—what lay inside that tunnel.

Slithering into the tiny opening appeared mandatory. The black space squatted dark and foreboding. But he had to know. He turned on his flashlight, stroked his Hopi charm once for good luck, and crawled in on his belly.

At first he had plenty of room to crawl and lift his head, but the tunnel rapidly bottlenecked to a space no more than fifteen inches from floor to ceiling. Creeping fear gripped his chest. Sonny forced himself to breathe slowly, to calm down. The thought of turning back filled his head, but he knew that once in the sunlight he'd never enter this tunnel again. Not for any price. If he wanted to see where it went, he had to continue now.

The tunnel narrowed even further. Sonny had to turn his head sideways to fit through. Twice he bumped his head on unforgiving rock overhangs, but he ignored the pain. Soft, flourlike sand lay under his chest, leftovers from an ancient river that once flowed through the passage, carving the tunnel from solid limestone and leaving the powdery sediment behind. Jagged walls closed in on either side of him like a limestone coffin. There was no sound other than his breathing. His flashlight clumsily played down the tunnel, and he thought he saw an opening in front of him. He pushed forward, ignoring the panic that lurked in his belly.

After another twenty feet, the ceiling suddenly slanted up, almost high enough for Sonny to stand up straight. The tunnel continued on. He wiped sweat from his face, leaving a smear of cave silt. He moved down the tunnel, one hand clutching the flashlight, the other gripping the Hopi charm.

Sonny played his flashlight around the cave, knowing the BYU students had traveled this same path over a half-century ago. Evil-looking white spiders sat motionless in their webs. Small crickets with long legs and even longer antennae moved slowly along the walls and ceiling.

The confining space made him nervous. The dark, foreboding feeling he'd experienced his first day on this mountain returned, only stronger, more intense... thicker.

He came to a massive pile of boulders, obviously the site of an ancient cave-in. A small, dark hole rested at the bottom.

This is where you boys stopped the first time, Sonny thought. *And when you came back here the second time, no one heard from you ever again.* Sonny stood, shivering, his flashlight beam frozen on the opening. He couldn't go in. He had to go in. Maybe the evil that was this mountain lay just beyond this jumbled pile of huge boulders. Maybe Jessup's demons waited for him just past the opening, waiting for him to poke his too-damn-curious head through, waiting to grab him and drag him off to some unknown horror.

Sonny pinched himself hard. *Get ahold of yourself, you cowardly old man. You've got to see what's past here or it's all you'll think about for the rest of your days.*

Without giving himself time to reconsider, Sonny flopped to the ground. He moved past a pumpkin-shaped boulder and wormed his way through the opening. He stood up, shaking, the cold feeling of terror rippling up and down his body in endless waves.

His flashlight beam traced across the tunnel walls, then came to rest on a small charcoal drawing. It was the only drawing he'd seen in the tunnel. It captivated him. It looked like a primitive sun. Six curving sunbeams reached out from a central circle, representing the sun's heat, presumably. The drawing was simple enough, but there was something odd about it. Very odd. Sonny couldn't place it, and at the moment he didn't give a shit—he suddenly suffered the unmistakable feeling that he was not alone.

Panic engulfed him like a snake swallowing a bird's egg. He scrambled back through the cave-in opening, and once through sprinted up the tunnel slope, bending at the waist to keep his head from scraping against rock.

Just like on the way in, the tunnel narrowed. He dove to the ground, crawling toward the outside. He fought back creeping, gnarled fingers of primal fear, fought back the feeling that there was something behind him, something moving effortlessly through this tiny stone coffin.

Stinking with the sweat of panic, Sonny grunted his way out of the cave and back onto the mesa. He finally stood up straight in the fading sunlight, his breath ragged. He'd cut his knuckles in his haste to get out. Blood fell in small droplets against the sun-heated rocks.

He sat perfectly still, save for his heaving chest. Nothing came out after him. He heard nothing moving inside the tunnel. Back in the open air, the feeling of panic evaporated. He'd imagined it, that was all there was to it. *Just claustrophobia brought on 'cause that cave reminds you of the coffin you'll be wearin' before too long, old-timer.*

But somewhere inside him, inside the part that had taken to the land, the part that embraced the desert like a lost love, he knew it was a lie. Sonny sat down on the edge of the cliff, his feet dangling above the fatal drop, his eyes staring out into the sunset. The mountain was death. A war raged inside Sonny McGuinness's mind. His emotions and his intellect battled for dominance. To stay was to get rich. Rich enough to retire forever. To leave? To leave, his instincts told him, might not make him rich.

But it would let him live.

Katerina Hayes snagged a quick peek inside her silver locket. On one side was a picture of herself with her husband, Harry. It was an excellent picture, although a little small, of them on vacation in Puerto Rico. The faces were tiny, but she could make out their matching blue floral shirts. He had black hair, just like her. This was the only picture that made her agree with her friends' constant observation—Harry and she did look like brother and sister. Their daughter, Kelly, smiled out of the locket's other side. The tiny three-year-old simply beamed, seeming to have a light all her own.

Katerina hadn't seen either of them for over a month, not since this whole Wah Wah situation erupted. First, she'd worked incessantly in the lab with that bastard Angus, who never seemed to get tired and was never satisfied no matter how many

hours the staff put in. Then straight from the lab to a plane, to Salt Lake City, to a Jeep that took her straight to this infernal desert. She'd only managed a quick phone call to Harry before she left, telling him that she was going to be on-site. No, she didn't know how long. No, she couldn't tell him where. No, she wouldn't be able to call him. No, she didn't know when she'd be able to call at all.

Yes, it did mean big things for her career.

That was all Harry needed to hear. He was so damn supportive of her career. She often had to work late (as did everyone on Angus's staff), yet Harry never complained. Not once. Inside the fridge she always found a meal waiting to be microwaved. Outside the fridge she always found a new crayon drawing from her daughter.

Keep working hard Mommy.

I love you Mommy.

I'm proud of you Mommy.

She knew Harry coached his daughter with the messages. He never let his daughter write things like "I miss you," or "come play with me," things that would have drowned her with guilt. Even after two years of Angus's unending demands, there was nothing but support from her wonderful husband and her growing daughter.

That's why she peeked at the locket before she went in to see Mr. Kirkland, to remind her of the reasons why, despite her "genius," she worked for a man who treated her like an imbecile. She was doing it for Harry and Kelly. Harry had always told her someday it would pay off.

It looked as if today was going to be that day.

With Angus and Randy gone, someone had to take charge of the lab's enormous workload. Someone had to take control and make sure everything continued at a flawless level.

Within an hour after the accident, Connell Kirkland had sent for her. O'Doyle gave her the order. She didn't like the big security guard. In fact, he scared the hell out of her. He'd killed people, or so the story went. Rumor had it he served in an Israeli commando unit, and had once single-handedly slain eight terrorists using nothing but a combat knife.

She knew her summons could only mean one thing. She took one last look at the locket, shut it, tucked it inside her shirt, and knocked on the door to his office.

"Come in," Connell called. She walked into the trailer, trying to look confident, but knowing she didn't.

"Sit down, Dr. Hayes," Connell said, gesturing to the single folding chair that sat in front of his cheap metal desk. She sat and looked into his cold, gray, penetrating eyes.

"As you know," Connell said, "Mr. Kool and Mr. Wright have been injured and will not be able to handle their duties for at least a few days. I've decided to put you in charge of the lab while they are gone. I know there are people in front of you with more experience and more seniority, but Mr. Kool's reviews of you are very flattering."

Katerina's eyes widened with surprise.

Connell turned to a manila folder. "Angus rates you as the top member of his staff next to Mr. Wright. I'll quote him to say, 'Dr. Hayes has an impeccable work ethic and never complains when I assign her extra duties. I know that when others on my staff are past the point of breaking, she will get the job done. Because of this, I give her far too much work, and yet she completes every task I assign. I can only compliment her by saying that in five or six years, she could be almost as good as I am now.'" Connell set the folder down and stared at her.

Katerina suddenly realized her jaw was hanging open. She clamped it shut. "I'm... very flattered. I didn't know he thought so highly of me."

"Well he does," Connell said. "And, from reading these reports, so do I. You're now in charge of the lab. Inform the rest of the staff of my decision. This will upset them, but I don't care. I'll expect you to handle it and get that lab running again at full capacity by tomorrow morning. I don't want to hear from them and I don't want to hear from you unless you've found something very interesting. Now, if you don't mind, I have a great deal of work to do." Connell looked down at the paperwork on his desk and started writing.

Katerina blinked a few times, amazed at the conversation. Just like that, she was in charge of the entire lab. She rose from her chair and walked out. Connell's head never lifted as she shut the door behind her.

On-site at the biggest test dig in the company's history, and she was *in charge*. She wanted to rush to a phone and call Harry, but phone calls remained off-limits. Well, he'd find out soon enough; more immediate things demanded her attention. This was her chance to move up the ladder, her chance to be noticed.

If her coworkers in the lab thought Angus was a hard boss, they didn't know anything yet. She might only have a few days; a week tops, to make the most of this opportunity. She wasn't about to let it slip away.

Chapter 16

August 25

The excitement had returned in a big way, but it couldn't entirely eclipse Veronica's smoldering disgust. Massive was the only word she could apply to the discovery—the find was simply unmatched in depth and impact.

So why did she feel like a transgressor? Like... a grave robber? She'd dug at dozens of sites, unearthed the remains of literally hundreds of human beings. So why was this plateau any different? Veronica couldn't answer that nagging question, but she wasn't going to let that stop her.

This find would make her famous.

The fact that a 9000-year-old culture from Tierra Del Fuego had migrated to North America (or perhaps the other way around, she didn't know) was stunning in itself. The fact that the mysterious culture remained alive in the late nineteenth century absolutely astonished her. But at this point she had little doubt. The burial of the Jessup camp was so similar to the Cerro Chaltel massacres that Veronica knew they had been wrought from the same culture.

With Sonny's help, she'd pieced together the story of the Jessup camp massacre. Jessup's crew had spent months blasting, hauling out rock, then blasting some more. The Chaltelians must have decided the miners were attacking, or perhaps had offended some aspect of their religion. Whatever the cause, the mining sparked an all-out assault. The Chaltelians even destroyed the mine, causing a cave-in that filled the shaft with tons of rock. To the outside world, no trace of the mine remained.

She and Sanji excavated pickaxes, dishes, tools, guns, and a dozen other common implements of the Old West. They'd even found two horses. At least they *thought* there were two—the dismembered remains made it difficult to be sure.

They'd moved down from the plateau, following an old, worn trail toward the desert, using the GPR suite to scan huge areas of ground without having to dig an ounce of dirt. Just less than two hundred yards from the massacre site they found another victim—and his horse—butchered and buried, presumably where they'd fallen while trying to escape. Without the GPR she would have passed over the area; the surface betrayed no indication of its buried secret.

Veronica brushed dirt off a human skull, careful not to disturb bits of mummified skin and hair. The skull had been split open, probably with a rock. Large linear scratch marks filled the interior of the brain case. It looked as if someone had jammed a knife in the open wound and violently stirred the brain. She sighed with amazement and disbelief at the violence of this lost culture.

She heard a commotion farther down the trail. She looked up from her brush and skull toward Sanji, who lightly slapped at the GPR monitor. He looked confused, as did two EarthCore men who shrugged their shoulders as they tweaked the controls.

Setting the skull down gently, she made her way down the rocky trail to the men.

Sanji looked up, perplexed. "The machine appears to not be working," he said, a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

"No sir, it's working just fine," one of the technicians said. Sanji shook his head no.

Veronica stared at the screen. Sanji's mouse danced along the portable unit, making the screen image flash back and forth. She frowned, seeing the reason for his confusion. Brown indicated disturbed earth, but it was a vertical line with black on either side. It went straight down.

"What's the scale on this, Sanji?"

"That is why I am saying it is not working right," he said with disgust. "One inch on the screen equals a half mile. According to this, the brown line goes down at least three miles, even past the bottom edge of this machine's range."

"It says there's a shaft running straight down for three miles?"

"No, not a shaft, a line. The line apparently runs straight out from us in either direction as far as we can see."

Veronica contemplated the data. If it was correct, there was a line just over two feet wide that went over three miles deep. It looked as if someone had dug a narrow trench and then filled everything back in. She looked at the mountain, her eyes following the path of the supposed line.

It hit her as if she'd walked blindly into a glass door.

She wondered how she couldn't have noticed it before. Straight out from where they stood, she could see a line. Not on the ground, but in the rocks that straddled that line. Big boulders looked like halves of the same rock, as if the line itself split them in two, letting the halves fall back on either side. In some places massive boulders simply stood tall with space between them, like giant limestone bookends.

She looked behind her, down the mountain along the same line. From this vantage point she could see several miles. There were places where solid boulders remained unbroken, but for the most part, all the way down to the flats, she could see a straight and razor-true line. Much of the line was obscured by the remnants of landslides and erosion, but landslides couldn't cover up all of it. It was simply too big.

She looked down at Sanji, who also stared numbly along the length of the line. He saw the same thing. They stood there, two highly trained scientific minds, trying to come up with a single idea of what it all meant.

Leaving his office, Connell walked past the mess Quonset, past the noise of music and laughter inside. After a week of seeing the miners pull double shifts and the lab rats go without sleep for days on end, he simply decided to stop being such an asshole. A quick call had brought in a helicopter loaded with beer, booze, and a boom box. It was time for the staff to celebrate.

The shaft was complete.

Being with them in camp and seeing the effects of stress and lack of sleep wasn't the same as calling the shots from far away. On paper, people were statistics. In person, they were ... well ... people. It was beginning to dawn on Connell just what a mega-prick he'd become since his wife's death.

AC/DC's "Highway to Hell" blasted from the boom box as light spilled from the mess building windows and onto the sand. Shadows bobbed as people moved about, making the light that hit the ground shimmer as if alive. Connell walked through the patches and into the shadows of the camp without slowing down or looking inside.

He'd instructed Mack to give the crew the alcohol and the boom box and throw a party (something that Mack apparently didn't need to hear twice). Success of a difficult job merited a reward. For the first night since the camp's construction, the crew had a chance to relax. The following morning they would dig the short horizontal adit to the tunnel complex. Barring any unforeseen problems like underground water or poison gas—neither of which they'd seen traces of during the shaft's construction—they would reach the Dense Mass in one more day. Maybe two.

The music and the laughter spilled into the night as he reached the Porta Johns outside the mess Quonset. He'd been in his office for six straight hours, going over reports, making plans, breaking the news to Barbara. He hadn't even left for dinner. It didn't matter; it wasn't as if he'd never skipped a meal before.

Just as Connell reached for the Porta John door, it opened from the inside. Veronica Reeves stepped out. She gave an "oh" of surprise and automatically put a hand on Connell's chest to keep from bumping into him. She removed the hand as

if he were somehow repulsive to the touch. The Porta John's door swung shut behind her.

"Good evening, Connell," she said in a professional tone.

He nodded. "Dr. Reeves."

"Call me Veronica, remember?"

"Is the GPR equipment working out for you, Veronica?"

She looked off in the distance, toward the plateau that held her discovery, then nodded. "Yes, it's exceptional," she said. "Very impressive."

"Good," Connell said. "EarthCore wants to take care of your needs."

She looked him in the eye, briefly, before her gaze wandered back up to the plateau. It had been so long since he'd talked to a woman about anything other than business, but Veronica seemed troubled.

"Is everything okay? All these bodies getting to you or something? I know that would get to me."

She looked at him again, and nodded. "Yes, everything's fine. I'm just a little distracted, that's all. The discovery and everything." She forced a smile.

He returned her forced smile with one of his own. "Well, if you'll excuse me..." he gestured to the Porta John door. She gave a quick look back, then laughed and scooted out of the way.

"Sorry about that," she said, this time with a genuine smile. "Next time we talk we'll have to do it in less awkward surroundings. You going to join the party?"

"No," Connell said a little too abruptly. "I've got work to do."

She gave a quick nod, then walked off toward the party. He watched her go for a few seconds. Her smile—the real one—stuck in his mind. Connell shook his head, as if to chase away abstract thoughts.

He relieved himself, then headed back to his office. A little more work to do, then he'd crash on the couch. Even at night the desert was too hot for his tastes. He genuinely hated Utah. His office felt comfortable, and the sound of the constantly running air-conditioner would drown out the music and the laughter.

BOOK III

Funeral Mountain.

Chapter 17

August 26, 8:15 a.m.

Mack made an early start of it. Some of the men hadn't partied all that hard the night before and they'd turned in early, exhausted from yet another double shift. Those men he awoke at 6:30 a.m. He hadn't made it to bed himself until just after 4 a.m. He had the satisfaction, however, of being the last one drinking.

A grade-A bitch of a hangover pounded at Mack's skull. Not that anyone could tell from looking at him. He was bright and chipper as he woke the early shift. He was about to embark on the defining moment of his career—even if he'd been decapitated, his head would still be smiling.

He had finished a staggering 2.3-mile deep shaft. A new world's record, a feat of engineering that—in his humble opinion, at least—rivalled anything on Earth. It wasn't just digging the shaft, which was surprisingly easy with Angus's laser drill head, it was all the support structures that went along with it. Miles of air ducting, miles of electrical, miles of temperature control, an elevator system capable of traversing the entire distance—the list went on and on. And it was all by his design.

It was a masterpiece.

As he accompanied the men down the monotonous twenty-minute elevator ride to the shaft floor, he could hardly wait for the ultimate triumph—breaking into the massive tunnel complex.

He checked his handheld air sampler, complete with thermometer (another of Angus's handy inventions). The digital readout reported 102 degrees Fahrenheit.

"If we had some beer and some women we could call this a sauna," said Brian Jansson. "Get us a big party cooking, eh?"

Mack laughed. Out of all the men in the mining crew, he liked Jansson the most. The Finlander was a skilled and careful worker, and the only time he bitched was to be funny.

"As long as I never have to see you naked, Jansson," Mack said. The crew laughed as the elevator touched down on the shaft bottom. They set about their work.

They drilled long burn holes into the wall, setting them in a pattern to blow rock downward and clear a ten-foot-high tunnel. They loaded the burn holes with explosives and a remote-activated detonator, then took the elevator up three

hundred feet. Mack made sure each man donned air masks connected to a central tank, then detonated the charge. Limestone dust billowed up the shaft like a plume of tan volcanic ash, blinding them for a few minutes.

Large, noisy air-filtration units spaced up the length of the shaft removed the dust within minutes. Those same filtration units helped keep the shaft's temperature at a tolerable level.

The blast had cleared a good thirty feet of new tunnel but failed to punch through to the existing complex. They were close, though—he felt it. Excitement pulsed through his muscles and tickled the inside of his stomach, making him forget his throbbing head.

The men set to hauling the tons of loose rock back to the elevator platform. The heavily laden elevator rose to where men at the top waited to clear away the debris. Mack and his crew had to repeat the process four times to clear the loose rock. Three hours after the first blast, the men relaxed as the elevator platform ascended with the last debris pile. While it rose, Mack guided another series of burn holes. Men at the top cleared the platform and the elevator returned. Once again Mack took his crew up to three hundred feet, then detonated the second charge.

Again they heard the cacophonous rumbling, but this time there was more—a billowing wave of heat roiled up the shaft along with the suffocating dust. Mack felt his skin prickle and burn in sudden, shocked complaint. A paralyzing wave of terror gripped him as the blast-furnace cloud soared upward with scorching temperatures. Behind him on the platform first one man screamed in alarm, then another, and another. Mack knew with sudden horrifying certainty that he was cooking alive. He held his breath and shuddered, waiting helplessly to burst into flames.

The screams stopped suddenly. While still insufferably hot, the temperature leveled out. Mack grabbed for his handheld unit: it read 152 degrees Fahrenheit. In a matter of seconds, the temperature had soared fifty degrees.

"It's okay everyone," Mack yelled through the mask. "We're safe, just relax."

The ventilators cleared away the dust, but made only a tiny dent in the temperature. The handheld unit said the new air contained plenty of oxygen, some hydrogen and higher levels of nitrogen, but no contaminants. The unit showed a green light for breathing. Mack pulled off his mask and took a tentative, testing breath. He wrinkled his nose in disgust at some faint yet offensive smell. Something like a combination of rotting fruit and dog shit. He motioned for the other men to remove their masks. Their faces showed instant disgust. Fritz Sherwood, at twenty-two the youngest of the mining crew, puked on his shoes, much to the amusement of the older men.

Jansson put his hands on his hips and took a deep, chest-swelling breath. "I love the smell of Hell in the morning," he said. "It smells like victory."

"You should love it, mate," Mack said. "It smells just like your breath." The men laughed; Mack felt the tension level instantly drop a few notches. He lowered the elevator to the shaft floor. The men carefully crawled through the loose rocks, lights from their helmets making clearly defined dust cones that bobbed along the rough walls. Within twenty feet, the tunnel expanded suddenly, opening into a wide, dry cavern. Their lights played along the rough tan-green walls, up to a flat

sandstone ceiling, and across each other's sweat-drenched smiles. They all felt the pride of a tough job well done. At the back of this new cavern stood the opening of a natural tunnel. It loomed black and promising, but Mack let no one explore further.

The men hauled loose rock back to the elevator shaft, but after barely fifteen minutes they started to fatigue. No exploring could be done until they found a way to deal with the temperature. Angus supposedly had something lined up, but Mack had yet to see what it was.

They cleared a path into the natural caverns. They found spots on the platform among the rubble, either standing between piles or sitting on them, and Mack took the exhausted men back to the surface. It was time to go to phase two, and start exploring the largest tunnel complex known to man.

10:17 a.m.

"Yes, Achmed," Katerina Hayes said in a condescending manner. "I see it's an aberrant spike, but that doesn't explain what caused it, now does it?"

Achmed glared at her. With Angus and Randy gone, she was now in charge. It hurt her to ride him like this, but she needed answers. Only now did she understand why Angus was always such a prick—Connell Kirkland demanded results, and producing those results was now her responsibility.

Just as she had taken Angus's place, Achmed had assumed Randy's duties. Those duties included finding the cause of small, unexplained seismograph spikes. Katerina had checked the spikes against Mack's blasting record—they hadn't been caused by any EarthCore activity. She feared the spikes meant cave-ins somewhere in the natural tunnels—something that would slow the project down, and would make Connell very unhappy.

"How am I supposed to find out what it is?" asked an exasperated Achmed. "I can't see through solid rock. And the damn computer keeps cutting out every six hours, how can you expect results with work conditions like this?"

"Listen, we have men down there! You fix the damn computer, and you find out what's going on. No one is going to die on my watch, you got that? I've got other problems to worry about."

Achmed's face screwed tight with anger and he turned back to the computer. She walked back to her tiny desk. She didn't have time to worry about Achmed's feelings. Earlier in the day, Dr. Reeves had brought in GPR data on a mysterious line that penetrated deep into the ground. Connell, of course, demanded and immediate explanation.

Katerina had assigned every free person to mapping that line, and the results were shocking. Four miles downhill and a half-mile uphill from where Dr. Reeves and Dr. Haak had found the phenomenon, the line took a ninety degree turn south.

Both of those new lines reached south for 3.28 miles. Exactly 3.28 miles. At that point, both took a ninety degree turn toward each other, making a new line, a line that completed a rectangle—a 4.652 mile-long and 3.28 mile-wide rectangle, in which the mine shaft sat almost dead-center. Who made it? Why? And how on earth did they do it?

Katerina didn't have any answers. She shuddered—Connell wouldn't like that, wouldn't like that at all.

11:52 a.m.

Mack and the rest of the miners watched in rapt attention as O'Doyle held up a bright yellow form-fitting jumpsuit. The suit, supposedly, would allow them to safely explore the caves.

"This is a KoolSuit," O'Doyle said, his voice bellowing like a drill sergeant. "That's Kool with a 'K,' as in its inventor, Angus Kool. The fabric is a microtubule material that accommodates the flow of coolant throughout the suit. This small backpack unit circulates fluid through the material to regulate your body temperature.

"The KoolSuits are coated with Kevlar, so they should hold up well while you're crawling through the tunnels. However, be aware of the dangerous environment. We expect the temperature to exceed two hundred degrees Fahrenheit, which means that if your suit rips in any way, repair it immediately with the patches stored in your backpack. Then immediately alert your supervisor and head for the surface as fast as possible.

"Without a functioning suit, you will dehydrate and die in a matter of hours. Even with the suit, make sure you are not underground for more than five hours at a time, or you may suffer blistering on your face, which is the only exposed skin area on your body. Do *not*, I repeat, do *not* remove the gloves. The rocks in the tunnel are hot enough to burn skin on contact. You are most likely to rip the gloves, if you rip anything, so each suit comes with a spare pair packed in the belt. If your gloves tear, undo the wrist seal, remove the gloves, put on the new ones, and *make* sure the wrist seal locks tight."

Mack shook his head in mild amazement. This was more like being in a science-fiction movie than a dig. The suits would let them explore the tunnels despite the incredible and life-threatening geothermal heat.

As Mack donned the rubbery KoolSuit, excitement washed over him. He was about to explore an area untouched by man. Granted, it was going to be mostly tight tunnels, nothing more to see than limestone walls eroded by millions of years of circulating water, but that feeling of discovery pumped adrenaline into his blood.

Mack and the afternoon shift, six men who were a little less hungover than their coworkers, suited up and headed for the shaft elevator. The suit gave him the chills on the surface, where the temperature was only 110 degrees. In twenty minutes they'd reach the shaft bottom and head for the tunnels, ready to take those first steps into the unknown.

12:21 p.m.

Connell's stare bore into O'Doyle's skull like a hot poker going straight through the eye socket into the brain. O'Doyle could have crushed Connell in a heartbeat, and both men knew it, but physical prowess had little to do with their relationship. Connell was the boss. Connell was authority. In O'Doyle's strict

world, authority was something you followed without question. Ten years in the Marines had riveted that rule into his soul to the point where it was never forgotten, never unlearned. The Marines had also drilled home one more concept: there is no excuse for failure.

A failure was exactly what O'Doyle felt like. Connell was a good boss, a demanding boss who gave specific orders and who expected those orders to be followed to the letter.

Only a year earlier O'Doyle had been jobless, let go after twenty years of service to his country. He'd spent the last fifteen years of that career as a hit man for the government, traveling the world to snuff out the enemies of democracy. O'Doyle excelled in jungle work and urban penetration. Often his superiors didn't expect him to return, but he always made it back. And at the end of his twenty years they retired him.

He had found himself suddenly without direction for the first time since he'd turned seventeen. Skills such as avoiding local police, jungle survival, and weapons expertise didn't translate into the civilian world. Out on his own there were no missions, no commanding officers, no *orders*. For the first time in twenty years, he had no one to tell him what to do, and he felt lost.

It was only three months after his "retirement" that he received a call from Connell. O'Doyle flew to Detroit, the ticket paid for courtesy of EarthCore, and interviewed for the job of chief of security.

O'Doyle had jumped on the offer, and in the subsequent months proven himself to be a tireless and reliable employee. Until now.

"You're telling me, Mr. O'Doyle, that we're missing two KoolSuits?" Connell's voice slowly rose in volume and temper, as different from his normal cold tone as summer from winter.

"Yes sir," O'Doyle said, eyes fixed on the back wall. "We discovered it this morning as Mr. Hendricks prepared to take the first crew into the tunnels."

"Do you have any idea how much each of those suits is worth?" Connell asked, his voice creeping toward a shout.

"Yes sir, Mr. Kirkland," O'Doyle said, snapping off the word sir with the authority of a salute. "Each suit is worth \$35,230."

Connell's vocal volume continued to climb. "As if the price wasn't enough to piss me off, there's the small fact that we're on the side of a mountain in the middle of a fucking desert! I know you well enough to assume that you accounted for all the suits both when we left and when we arrived, now isn't that so?"

"Yes sir."

"As a security chief, you seem to be very good at misplacing things in the middle of a fucking desert, don't you?"

"Yes sir."

Connell's eyes blazed wide with anger. "As long as I've got you here," he said, "why don't you tell me what you found out about the accident."

O'Doyle swallowed hard, feeling a trickle of sweat roll down his temple. He felt his boss's stare grow harsher, more intense.

"Certain restraining bolts in the separator machine's cylinder mechanism appear to have been loosened," O'Doyle said. "With the pressure of the device and the massive RPMs it was only a matter of time before the bolts worked loose and

the spinning cylinder hit the sides of the machine. When that happened it tore itself apart."

The air conditioner's hum and the slow thump of Connell's fingers drumming on the desktop—*ba-da-ba-bump, ba-da-ba-bump*—were the only sounds in the trailer. O'Doyle thought Connell looked like a grenade with the pin pulled, ready to explode at any second.

"Find out what the hell is going on around here," Connell growled. "Now get out of my sight."

O'Doyle was out the door in less than two seconds. His body vibrating with fury. Failing Connell hurt.

O'Doyle fought to keep his own anger down. Someone was making him look like a fool. He knew he wasn't the smartest man that ever walked the Earth, but he was one of the most tireless and dedicated. Sooner or later he'd find the truth, he'd find the bastard responsible. When that happened, O'Doyle planned on carving *Semper Fidelis* into the fuckwad's chest.

Two missing KoolSuits. Two injured scientists. Sabotage. No, not just sabotage, expert sabotage, as if someone knew the equipment inside and out.

"They wouldn't..." Connell whispered. His fingers drummed the desktop once, then he picked up the phone and dialed.

"Milford Valley Memorial Hospital," a woman answered.

"Angus Kool's room, please."

There was a pause as the woman transferred the call. The phone rang five times before someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Angus?"

"No, this is Randy."

"Randy, Connell here. Let me talk to Angus."

"He's sleeping," Randy said.

"So wake him up."

"The doctor doesn't want him disturbed," Randy said. "He's still feeling a lot of head pain."

"I don't care if his brains are dripping out of his ears. You wake him up right fucking now, Randy."

"Fine, hold on a second."

After a brief pause, the phone rustled as it switched hands. "Mr. Kirkland, what's up?" said a sleepy Angus.

Connell's fingers drummed the desktop, *ba-da-ba-bump, ba-da-ba-bump*. "How are you doing?"

"I was sleeping, that's how I was doing," Angus said. "What do you need?"

Ba-da-ba-bump, ba-da-ba-bump.

"Just wanted to check up on you guys."

"Well, we're not going anywhere," Angus said.

"Fine," Connell said. "Sorry to wake you."

Angus hung up without another word. Angus and Randy were right where they were supposed to be.

So who was responsible for all the trouble?

Chapter 18

12:35 p.m.

"Slow down, Jansson," Fritz Sherwood called through the narrow tunnel. "You're descending too fast."

Brian Jansson looked up from his slightly swinging line, his light playing up the chasm and onto Sherwood's face. He dangled in a sea of black, like a yellow worm on a hook.

Jansson answered in a condescending tone. "Ya, ya, ya. I'll be sure to be careful, Mommy."

"Asshole," Fritz murmured under his breath. He didn't want to be in this sliver of a tunnel. Rough limestone walls pressed against his body on every side. There was no turning around here; to get out you either crawled backward for thirty feet or descended into the chasm. Fritz panned his headlamp on a plastic-coated map. At Mack's orders they'd followed a tiny offshoot of the main tunnels, an offshoot that led to this chasm. According to the map, several thin tunnels branched off the chasm floor which lay 150 feet below. While too small for hauling ore, the tunnels might allow a shortcut to the Dense Mass, provided they were big enough to crawl through. If any of the tunnels showed promise, Mack would send more men for a full exploration.

"Almost to the bottom," Jansson called up. Fritz looked down into the chasm, only his head peeking over the edge. He hoped he wouldn't have to make that descent.

"It looks okay," Jansson called. "Very jagged, poor footing, but it looks okay."

All at once a jangle of equipment, a cry of pain, and a muffled, brittle snap echoed through the narrow, high-walled chasm. Fritz's light weakly illuminated Jansson's prone body far below.

"Jansson! You okay?"

A pause.

Jansson's voice echoed up from below. "Yeah, I'm fine if you don't count my broken leg."

"Quit fucking around, Jansson."

"I wish I was. My foot slipped on this boulder. Leg's broken. I think my arm might be dislocated, too. Can't move the fucking thing. Mack's going to kill me."

"Hold on, I'm coming down."

"Don't be an idiot! You know procedure. If you have rope problems we're both stuck here. You can't pull me up by yourself—go back and get Mack and some help."

"You're crazy," Fritz called. "I can't leave you here."

Jansson let out a short laugh. "Oh ya, what's going to happen to me?" The laugh ended with a grunt of pain.

"But it'll take me twenty minutes just to crawl back," Fritz said. "You'll be down there for almost an hour."

"Good, I've been wanting a little privacy to spank the monkey." Jansson let out another laugh. "Thank goodness I hurt my left arm and not my right. Now get going, this thing hurts like a bitch."

"Is the suit ripped?"

Jansson gently ran his hands up and down his leg. "No, it's intact," he called up. "Fuck, this *hurts*. Would you go get somebody?"

"Okay, just hold tight," Fritz said, his voice echoing in the still chasm. He slid backwards, pushing his way through the tunnel that was no bigger than an air vent.

In minutes, all sound of Fritz's efforts faded away, leaving Jansson alone. Jansson pushed himself to a sitting position and gritted his teeth against the pain. He'd felt worse. What was this, the third time he'd broken his leg? The fourth? It was no big deal. All he had to do was sit and wait. Help would be there before he knew it.

He sat still and quiet for fifteen minutes, ears instinctively hunting for a sound and finding none. He hated the quiet, and caves were *dead* quiet. Not a sound at all, other than your own. You didn't notice how noisy the world around you was until you came to a place like this. No wind, no creaks, no squeaks, no honks... nothing. It was a weird feeling, like someone had grabbed nature's remote control and hit 'mute.' Damn fool thing to get in a hurry and break a leg. He should have been more—

A sound disrupted his thoughts. He flashed his light upwards, toward the tunnel 150 feet above. Nothing moved. He waited for the sound to come again, but only silence met his ears. He looked around the chasm bottom, his headlamp following his gaze. There were several tunnels, but all very small, probably too small to crawl through. The trip was a waste of—

He heard it again. This time clearly. The sound of dry, rustling leaves across open pavement. His eyes darted to each tunnel entrance as the sound grew louder.

1:20 p.m.

Mack leaned over the edge of the chasm. His light probed the jagged rocks, but illuminated only rock.

He cupped his hands and shouted. "Jansson! Jansson, answer me, mate."

Nothing.

Fritz was right behind him, the passage so narrow Mack couldn't even turn around to talk. "This is it, Fritz? You're sure."

"Absolutely," Fritz said. "He's down there."

Mack pulled out the Marco/Polo device and checked the signals, but the unit showed only his name and Fritz's.

"He's not answering. I don't see any movement." Mack noticed that Jansson's rope still hung off the ledge, dangling into the chasm below. He gave it an experimental tug—it moved easily. Mack prepared to hook his climbing rig to the rope, preparing to descend, then stopped himself.

Why isn't he still tied to it? If he's hurt, why would he unhook it, knowing full well we have to pull him up?

Frowning, Mack started pulling up the rope. He reeled in almost 150 feet: he stopped as he reached the end.

The rope had been cut.

Mack looked at the rope's neatly sliced end. His light played off a thin line of something wet. He touched it with his gloved fingers, then held the fingers up for a closer inspection.

It looked like blood.

Claim jumpers? Could there be some crazy claim jumpers down here?

Fritz nudged Mack's foot. "We going down to get him or what?"

Mack stared at his fingers, at the rope's cut end. He leaned over the edge again, his light carefully scanning the chasm floor. Nothing moved. "He's not there, Fritz."

"Not there? Where the hell else could he be?"

"I don't know," Mack said. "Could you see him after he fell?"

"Yeah, I could see him fine."

"Well he's not there now. Start moving back, and do it quick."

"We've got to go down and look for him!"

"We're not going down there right now, mate," Mack said. "We're going back to phone for help." Mack slid backward, working his way out of the thin tunnel. He'd already sent men back to the shaft bottom to phone up and report the missing man.

He hoped O'Doyle knew how to rappel.

1:32 p.m.

Katerina Hayes tried in vain to rub the sleep from her eyes. She hadn't slept a wink last night and neither had most of the lab rats. The staff hunted for an answer regarding the mysterious, miles-long rectangle that surrounded the campsite and the mine. So far there were no answers.

The best guess revolved around an incredibly high-powered laser fired from orbit—and that was a joke. They'd found no burn marks or melting of any kind. On the surface the line was nearly invisible—you could only see it if you knew exactly where to look. If not for the GPR suite, people might have walked over it a hundred times without noticing.

Most of the line's camouflage came from landslides, water erosion, windswept dirt, and sand. Such natural actions had covered most of the line, leaving only split rocks on either side.

Extrapolating on a computer erosion model, they had generated estimates of the rectangle's age. The current estimates fixed the rectangle at between seven thousand and thirteen thousand years old.

Calling it science on the fly was an understatement. The staff made it up as they went along, dubbing the new discipline *chronogeomorphology*—judging a formation's age by the erosion on and around it. She guessed they might shave another two or three thousand years, but not much more than that. The computers handled most of the work now, leaving her to worry about other must-solve problems.

"Achmed! What's the status on that latest tremor?"

Achmed rose from his station and sluffed over. His normally dark and beautiful eyes were now just plain dark. Sunken cheeks showed the effects of only two hours' sleep in the past two days.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a tremor, Katerina," he said with an angry, tired voice.

"What would you call it?" Katerina asked with audible frustration. She was pushing him hard and she knew it. The tremors threatened not only the financial future of this operation but the lives of the men who worked the shaft. A second aberrant spike on the seismograph, this time only a half-mile from the main shaft, had thrown the lab into a tizzy.

"The epicenter of the occurrence happened closer to the surface, but it was still isolated," Achmed said with a sigh. "Again, no sympathetic vibrations anywhere."

Katerina scowled. It was the same story she'd heard before. "Dammit, Achmed, I need answers." She leaned toward him, her eyes flashing with intensity. "You're the expert on this, and you've been working on it for two days; there's no way you don't have any ideas. I want a hypothesis. Now."

Achmed glared at her. Their friendship was gone. Vanished. Dissipated by her demanding position of power.

"There are many caves in this area," Achmed said. "Some of them are probably unstable. My best guess is that the aberrant spikes are cave-ins."

She'd expected that answer. While they sank the shaft without explosives, drilling the adit had required blasting. Normally that would pose little threat to overall geologic stability, but with a massive network of caves anything was possible. The blasting could have damaged the natural structure enough to cause subsequent settling and cave-ins.

She stared at Achmed, who looked at the floor, defeated. She knew why. Cave-ins meant that the structure wasn't sound. That meant lives, and dollars, were at stake.

On top of his spike problem, Achmed still couldn't figure out why the seismograph simply dropped out for five minutes at 11:19 a.m., just as it had every six hours for almost three days straight.

They had to identify the spikes and verify the stability of the entire mountain. If they couldn't, Katerina would have to stand before Connell Kirkland and tell him to halt exploration. Somehow she didn't think he'd like that suggestion.

2:23 p.m.

O'Doyle double-timed it to Connell's office trailer. He wasn't going to take any shit this time, this time it wasn't his fault. Anyone could see that; how could he be held responsible for a man disappearing over two miles underground?

He knocked quickly and opened the door without waiting for a response. Connell looked up from his piles of paperwork.

"They lost a man in the tunnels," O'Doyle said. Connell's eyes began to narrow, then relaxed. A strange look crossed over his face. O'Doyle guessed it was a look of concern, although he'd never seen Connell concerned about anything.

"When?"

"About an hour ago. They searched right away, then sent someone back to notify us, but it took them forty-five minutes to hike back to the bottom of the shaft and call up the news."

"Who is it?"

"Brian Jansson."

"Was he troublesome at all?"

"Not that I know of, sir. Apparently he was hurt. His partner went for help, and when help arrived Jansson was gone."

Connell's fingers drummed the desk. "I see three possibilities, none good," he said. "The first is that Jansson was stupid enough to wander away after his partner went for help."

"Not likely, sir. Mack's men wouldn't do that."

Connell nodded. "I agree. The second possibility is that he's working for the same people that sabotaged the lab. Maybe he faked his injury, and he's on his way to the Dense Mass, to help someone else drill in from another spot on the mountain. I'm sure you can guess the third possibility."

"That the saboteurs are in the caves, and they've got Jansson."

Connell pointed his finger at O'Doyle. "You get down there and find out what's happening. Who are the best guards you've got?"

"Lybrand, Bill Cook and Lashon Jenkins."

"Take them down with you. I want our man found. And put Lybrand with the miners, they have to keep moving towards the Dense Mass—if someone is trying to jump this claim, we can't afford to wait."

"Yes sir," O'Doyle turned and reached for the door.

"And don't say anything sensitive over the shaft phone," Connell said. "We can't trust anyone or anything at this point."

2:31 p.m.

Kayla's brow furrowed in confusion. She'd picked up a call between Connell and Barbara Yakely. Connell suspected someone might be trying to jump the claim. He wanted Barbara to find out what company was buying up land around the Wah Wah Mountains. Connell felt positive a spy walked among the camp personnel, possibly working with operatives floating along the camp's periphery.

That made no sense to Kayla. No one could run a covert operation like that without at least *some* communication, and she'd picked up nothing. The only people on this mountain were herself and the EarthCore staff.

All her instincts told her Connell was wrong, but he was a very sharp, very successful man, and she wouldn't just dismiss his concerns. If someone else was working this mountain, her payday could be in jeopardy. Her \$3.5 million estimate would shrivel to nothing. That meant she couldn't assume anything.

Sooner or later, someone would fuck up and she'd figure it all out. Patience was the key. Patience. The camp was alive with activity and confusion. That night would be a good time to sneak in and snag a KoolSuit. She had to find a way down into those tunnels and take at least a limited peek. Any intel she could provide on the tunnel system would increase her price.

Judging by the level of activity, she expected the staff's fatigue to highpoint around 1:00 a.m. That would be the perfect time.

2:54 p.m.

Six more miners donned KoolSuits and loaded up with supplies of food, water, batteries, floodlights, and even a generator—everything needed to set up a base camp in the tunnels far below. Drenched with sweat, Connell watched them tramp into the adit as he talked on the phone with Mack, who was down at the base of the elevator shaft.

"I don't think he's a spy, mate," Mack said. "I know the man, and besides, that doesn't make any sense."

"Did Sherwood actually see the broken leg?"

"No. Sherwood followed procedure. When Jansson said he was hurt, Sherwood came right back to get help."

"So now you've got a man who claims he's broken a leg, which no one saw, and when you go into that cavern he's gone. What does that tell you?"

Mack was silent for a moment, then answered quietly. "It tells me that maybe he was lying."

"That, or someone moved him," Connell said. "Now listen close. Six more miners are on the way down along with O'Doyle and Lybrand. O'Doyle will take over searching for Jansson. You take Lybrand and the six new men and continue on. She's there for your protection. We may be in a situation where time is vital. We have to reach that Dense Mass first. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Kirkland."

Connell checked his watch, hung up and quickly walked down the trail to the Jeep. From there he drove to the administration trailer. He walked through the door just as the bulky cellular rang.

"Hello, Barbara," Connell answered. "What have you got for me?"

"I ain't got squat, honey," Barbara said in her sandpapery voice.

"Well, someone has to be buying up rights in the area," Connell said. "Someone is making a move on us, I know it."

"No one has bought any rights in that area since 1945, honey. Ourselves excluded, of course. I had our people check with all of our corporate informants, too, and we can't find anybody who's even *looking* at the site. A few are starting to get curious what we're doing there, but so far you're all alone."

Connell stared off into space. His theory had just gone down the crapper. "Thanks Barbara. I'll call you if anything turns up."

He broke the connection. It wasn't the competition. So what was going on in the camp? And, more importantly, what the hell was going on in that shaft?

3:11 p.m.

They built this.

She didn't know how she knew it, she just did. Veronica sat cross-legged on one corner of the rectangle, turning her head slowly to look down each line. One line

spread out and up the mountain, disappearing over the near ridge. The other line, one of the “short” ones, moved outward at a ninety-degree angle from its friend.

What had this meant to the Chaltelians?

The lab dated the rectangle between twelve thousand and seven thousand years old. Precise figures didn't matter—the time span did. It was roughly the same time frame for the Chaltelians' dominance over the Tierra Del Fuego area. Too close to be coincidence.

While hidden for millennia, the rectangle was an accomplishment greater than the pyramids and more impressive than Peru's massive Nazca lines. Egyptians built *up*. Chaltelians built *down*. Way down. *Impossibly* way down. The depth stumped Katerina. It didn't seem possible to dig a trench that deep today, let alone thousands of years ago by primitive people. Yeah, and that's what they said about the pyramids at one time. Hell, some people still said that about the pyramids. Somehow Veronica doubted alien involvement in Egypt—or Utah, for that matter.

Something extraordinary had happened on this mountain. A mystery worth the attention of her entire career.

She needed to bide her time a little while longer. Connell couldn't keep her in camp forever. She wouldn't need Connell's funding, not once the story got out. Once the world knew of the rectangle, she'd shut him down faster than students cleared out after the last day of finals.

Then the mountain would be hers alone.

Chapter 19

4:41 p.m.

O'Doyle's feet gingerly touched the chasm bottom. He let the rope hold most of his weight as he carefully watched his footing on the treacherous ground. Certainly looked like a good place to break a leg; jagged rock stuck up all over like spikes in a Burmese tiger trap. O'Doyle kept one hand on the rope, the other on his H&K. The weapon's strap looped over his neck and around his back.

He turned his head, moving the headlamp light across the steep-walled chasm. He saw it almost instantly, a touch of wetness in the forever-arid area. Only a touch—most of it was already dry. The chasm's zero humidity dried things out in a hurry. Even in the strange lighting, there was no mistaking it.

A splatter pattern of blood.

O'Doyle examined it. About two feet off the ground and three feet long, horizontal with a slight angle, a center streak of red surrounded by a spray of fine droplets. The victim had been sitting four or five feet from the wall.

He moved to the spot where Jansson probably sat. There was more blood on the ground rocks, also dry. He carefully probed the area, then his light fixed on something pale and white.

O'Doyle picked it up, inspected it, then flashed his light rapidly around the chasm, looking for any threat. He started back up the rope with an expert's speed. He wanted out of that chasm, and wanted out now.

5:11 p.m.

When Sonny heard the news of Jansson's disappearance, he made up his mind once and for all. It just wasn't worth it. The rest of these idiots could delude themselves all they wanted, but not Sonny McGuiness. No way.

He'd researched as Connell requested. He'd found several disturbing things that Connell chose to ignore. Well, they couldn't be ignored anymore. One man was missing, two more sat in the hospital. It sounded crazy, but Sonny knew what was going on.

Funeral Mountain was slowly waking up.

Sonny could feel it in his bones. That awful feeling he'd had from the first day on Funeral Mountain was getting worse. He couldn't stand it any more. He'd lose his percentage—but he'd just have to make it up somewhere else. Dead men can't count cash. Something about that strange cave drawing still haunted him, something he couldn't put his finger on. It added to his unease, to his *instinctive* desire to leave.

Besides, he still knew about the second entrance. He'd wanted to tell Connell about it, but just couldn't—that bit of information was too tasty to give up for free. Maybe he could cut a deal with Connell: give up the second entrance in exchange for keeping one percent of the mine's profits. Maybe, maybe not, but he'd make that deal via a phone call, because he was getting the hell out of Dodge.

Sonny packed his bags. Tomorrow morning he'd talk to Connell and get permission to leave. Connell held the keys to Sonny's Hummer, just like he held the keys to every vehicle in the camp. Sonny didn't care; he'd get the keys one way or another. He had to get out. Hopefully he could talk Cho into leaving with him—the kid-doctor had a lot of potential, and Sonny didn't want to see him hurt or dead.

Whether Cho came or not wouldn't stop Sonny, for he knew in his soul that if he stayed much longer, Funeral Mountain would get him as well.

8:15 p.m.

The night air started to chip away the day's heat, but didn't stop Connell's sweat-fest. He stood at the adit mouth, clutching the phone that ran all the way to the shaft bottom over two miles away. What Mack told him over the phone didn't help to cool him down.

With more miners in the tunnels to hunt for Brian Jansson, Mack had continued toward the Dense Mass per Connell's orders. Mack had discovered a large cavern—and in it found something completely unexpected. He'd trekked forty-five minutes back to the elevator shaft in order to call up to the surface.

"You've got to come down and see it, mate," Mack said, the excitement in his voice not quite masking his exhaustion. "I'm not kidding. O'Doyle's here with me and he agrees. You'd best bring the professors, too."

"Are you nuts, Mack?" Connell said, drawing stares from workers hauling loose rock out of the adit. "You know what those two will do if they see it."

"What they do doesn't matter, Mr. Kirkland. You made a deal."

It was all Mack needed to say. He was right. Connell had promised Veronica she would be informed of anything they found, and he would keep his word, despite the fact that Mack's new discovery might give her the ammunition she needed to shut the mine down completely.

"Okay," Connell said. "I'm coming down with the professors. Any sign of Jansson?"

"Not a lick, mate. We're going to set up our first base camp in the new cavern, then I'm going to take the fresh hands back to explore the tunnels around the chasm where Jansson disappeared. We've got six men there now, but they don't think they can cover the area in a reasonable amount of time."

"But I told you to press forward, Mack."

"Yes sir, you did," Mack said. "But according to the maps Angus made, there's about thirty small tunnels in that area. The men there say the tunnels are difficult to navigate, which is slowing them down. It's my opinion we need to focus all of our manpower there. O'Doyle just told me he went into the chasm and found blood—Jansson's hurt, sir, and if he's still alive his time is running out."

Connell leaned against the adit wall, his fingers drumming lightly on the rough limestone, *ba-da-ba-bump, ba-da-ba-bump*. He wanted Mack to press forward, but he couldn't keep asking him to abandon one of his men.

"Let me talk to O'Doyle." Connell waited while the phone shifted hands.

"Mr. Kirkland?" O'Doyle said.

"Yes."

"This is absolutely amazing. I've never seen anything like it."

"I've heard all about the sights, Mr. O'Doyle, what about Jansson?"

"Nothing yet, sir, but we're looking. It's slow going when it takes forty-five minutes just to reach the phone."

Connell heard something in the man's voice, as if a detail remained unclarified. "What did you find, Mr. O'Doyle?"

"I rappelled into the chasm. I found a blood streak on the wall."

"What did you make of it?"

"It was two feet up from the floor. It's a splatter pattern. Definitely not from someone just falling and bumping their head. Looks to me like a slashing wound, one that cut deep."

"You think it's Jansson's?"

"Unless someone else down here is bleeding, yes. There's more, but I'd rather tell you in person. I don't think I should say anything else over this line."

Ba-da-ba-bump, ba-da-ba-bump.

"O'Doyle, is it safe to bring the professors down there?"

"Yes, sir, it's safe. We've got plenty of firepower. If someone did attack Jansson, there's a big difference between an unarmed man with a wounded leg and four trained guards armed with automatic weapons. Look, Mack insists on searching for Jansson, sir, but you need to get down here ASAP." O'Doyle paused, as if he didn't want to reveal more bad news. "Someone... someone beat us down here," he said finally.

Connell didn't answer. He gazed absently at a rock on the ground. The words didn't seem to register in his mind.

"Sir?" O'Doyle said. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes, I did. How do you know?"

"You'll see when you get here," O'Doyle said.

Connell sighed and hung up. Anger fought defeat for dominance of his emotions. Someone, somehow, had reached the caverns before EarthCore.

It wasn't over yet. He pushed defeat from his mind and focused on the anger. He'd put too much time into this project to let someone else walk away with the prize.

11:02 p.m.

"Katerina, wake up," Achmed said, shaking her shoulder gently. She lifted her head from the desk, blinking away much-needed sleep. Achmed ignored the small puddle of drool sitting on her paperwork.

"What is it?" she asked, rubbing her eyes as she sat up.

"There's been another spike," Achmed said. Excitement poured from him, as did concern. The latter quickly brought Katerina fully awake.

"What's got you all fired up?"

"I tried plotting the three spikes against Angus's map. I was trying to see if I could identify a certain line of weak tunnels. I entered the data for the three spike epicenters and found something.

Achmed walked quickly through the maze of equipment, leading Katerina to the computer that constantly displayed Angus's green and yellow tunnel map. Three red dots glowed softly.

"What am I looking at?" Katerina asked. Achmed worked the mouse and the keyboard.

"The initial aberrant spike was 2.34 kilometers below ground zero, 3.02 kilometers away from the main shaft." The first red light started to blink.

"This is the second one," Achmed said, still tapping keys. The second light began to blink. "It is 1.78 kilometers down, and only 1.25 kilometers from the main shaft. The third one happened while you were dozing, only an hour ago. It's 0.58 kilometers down, 0.32 kilometers from the shaft."

"The tremors are getting closer to the shaft?" Katerina asked.

"Not tremors, cave-ins," Achmed said with excitement. "I'm now positive those are cave-ins, but that's not all—look at this."

A line representing one of the small natural tunnels glowed a brighter yellow than the rest. The line was very close to the first red dot, and ended directly under the second. Achmed tapped again; another yellow line pointed away from the second dot, ending near the newest spike marker. The red dots seemed to be connecting the yellow lines, making one long line where before there had been only separate tunnels.

"So the cave-ins are occurring *between* existing tunnels?"

Achmed nodded.

"How much space do the red dots represent?"

"It's impossible to tell, they're just epicenters," Achmed said. "But judging from Angus's map, if the cave-ins do connect the existing tunnels, we're talking between fifty and a hundred meters of solid rock each time. But that's not all, look at *this*."

Achmed rotated the picture so that they looked straight down on the red dots and the bright yellow lines. He tapped the keys and a new flashing green dot appeared.

"What is that?" Katerina asked.

"That's the main shaft," Achmed answered.

Katerina felt her stomach drop. The three red dots and the yellow lines weren't perfectly straight, but the path was clear.

They formed a line.

A line heading for the shaft.

Chapter 20

August 27, 12:11 a.m.

Connell's forty-five minute walk from the elevator shaft to Mack's discovery had a few rough spots, but wasn't that difficult. He'd left Bill Cook to guard the base of the elevator shaft. Cook was a thick man, a younger, bigger version of O'Doyle, and would have slowed them down. Lashon Jenkins was tall but skinny, a wiry, athletic man with mocha-colored skin and intelligent eyes.

In some places the caves forced Jenkins, Connell, Veronica, and Sanji to crawl on their bellies, KoolSuits skidding along dirt and rocks, but for the most part they were able to walk comfortably upright. The caves were little different from the adit—a long stretch of rough, unremarkable stone walls.

The big cavern itself, however, was a completely different story. Connell hated to admit it, but he felt just as amazed as everyone else by the place the miners had quickly dubbed "Picture Cavern." The massive space easily ran the length and width of a football field. The ceiling arched high overhead, as if the cavern were a small domed stadium. Powerful flood lamps lit up the flat, dirtless stone floor. Something was imbedded dead-center in the cavern's arching roof, something not natural. It was possibly the size of a beach ball, but there was no way to get at it without constructing elaborate scaffolding to reach the hundred-foot ceiling. Besides, no one cared about the ceiling—the walls held everyone's attention.

"What do you make of it, Dr. Reeves?" Connell asked the glassy-eyed Veronica.

"I don't know," she said quietly, as if she were in a church. "I saw drawings in Cerro Chaltel, but nothing like this. We couldn't check this far underground without something like these KoolSuits. I don't understand it, I don't know how people could survive in this heat long enough to create all of this."

They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, staring in awe at the brightly colored carvings and paintings that covered every last inch of the sprawling stone walls.

12:27 a.m.

Veronica Reeves basked in Nirvana.

At Cerro Chaltel, drawings were sparse, spread so far across the endless tunnels that each one was like discovering a lost treasure. With each drawing she had

moved closer to understanding the Chaltelians' writing. She was convinced they had a written language—not just pictographs, but actual words. When her workers at Cerro Chaltel discovered another crude, priceless drawing, Veronica would rush to the find, hoping each time it would be the Chaltelian Rosetta Stone.

Down here, under the Wah Wah Mountains, things were different. An unbelievable amount of painted and carved pictures filled the walls. Up to a height of about twelve feet, art covered almost every square inch of space, not just once, but twice. The first set of pictures were regimented, cultured carvings. The second set were wild, multicolored, primitive paintings, drawn like graffiti atop the carvings. The combination created a chaotic, electric feel.

"This is amazing," Sanji said, his voice a reverent whisper.

The carvings showed a level of stoneworking skill that defied imagination. Forgotten symbols dominated the ten-inch by ten-inch relief carvings. Smooth edges and perfect curves proved a tribute to the abilities of long-dead artisans.

Some clearly recognizable images, like junipers, mountains, and animals, illustrated scenes from the desert above. Other images were unknown, their meanings lost. She smiled at a picture clearly illustrating the Wah Wah mountain range from a distance. The carving, easily the largest one in the cavern at ten feet wide by eight feet high, was a photorealistic relief of the peak above them. The skill was *phenomenal*. The mountain carving looked perfect, right down to identifiable landmarks. Work that detailed, that exquisite, must have taken decades to complete.

While the carving quality boggled the imagination, the paintings looked like Cro-Magnon cave drawings; primitive by any standard. Perfectly preserved in the hot, dry cave, the bright, angry colors of the paintings showed many unrecognizable figures—probably the Chaltelians' myths and religious icons.

"Why would they cover such wonderful carvings with such crude drawings?" Sanji asked, eyes wide with wonder.

The difference between the carving and painting skills pushed Veronica to an immediate conclusion. "The paintings seem almost like vandalism," she said. "It's like there are at least two distinct cultures down here. One became very good at working stone, and another that came after possessed only rudimentary ability."

"But the low-quality work is on top," Sanji said. "The paintings are on top of the carvings. I would think the culture would get better as time wore on."

"My first guess is that the Chaltelian culture was taken over by barbarians, for lack of a better word," Veronica said. "Or, possibly, what I consider to be the Chaltelian culture is actually the barbarians, and another group, an older group, made the carvings."

"So the paintings are some kind of defacement?"

"I don't know," Veronica said. "I'm seeing a lot of repetitive symbols, both in the carvings and in the paintings. If the cultures are separate, they are similar. Possibly the succeeding culture incorporated elements of the predecessor."

"I do not see any repetitions," Sanji said, sounding like an excited schoolboy. "Show me."

"Look here," Veronica said. "See this carving of this round creature with all the tentacles? It's obviously some sort of a god or deity representation. If you look around, you'll see them everywhere."

Sanji's face lit up with recognition. "Oh, yes! I have been seeing that image in other places around the cave. I have been running from one side to the other like a silly tourist, but I have seen it."

"Take a few steps back with me," Veronica said. They walked backwards, still facing the wall. As they backed up, a larger image started to dominate their vision. It was large, almost fifteen feet high and a bit longer across. Bold black outlines framed brilliantly bright reds, oranges, and yellows. The picture's angry vibrance resonated despite its primitive quality.

Sanji's face showed confusion, then sudden understanding as the image blended into a cohesive pattern. Dark orange covered the circular body while reds and yellows dominated the extended arms. At least she guessed they were arms. Or tentacles, or some equivalent.

"Their god again?" Sanji asked.

"That would be my guess," Veronica said. "Or at least it's one of their gods. The barbarians may have incorporated elements of Chaltelian religions, but who knows?"

She knew some piece of information was missing. Something that could make sense of all this. The missing pieces bothered her in a way she couldn't identify. She wondered if it was the dank feeling of dread permeating the place that haunted the edges of her mind. It was the same feeling she'd felt on the surface, but down here it was almost overpowering.

Sanji walked away to another image that caught his interest. Veronica continued to stare up at the large tentacle god. If that's what it was, a god, then she could understand the tribe's violent, brutal nature. The image on the wall reeked with anger and aggression. If it was a god in the pantheon of these lost people, then it had to be a god of war.

Or, perhaps, a god of evil.

12:30 a.m.

Connell held the sign in his shaking hands. Fury swept over him, clouding his mind. Anger this strong, this pure, rarely came his way. Only once before could he remember feeling this utterly enraged—when he'd learned his wife's murderer had been exceedingly drunk.

The sign was simple; a small, thin piece of plywood little bigger than a sheet of typing paper. A stake pointed out the bottom. Painted on the sign was a curved, cartoon head of a little man, his nose peeking over a line that hid the rest of his body. His fingers also hung over that line. Two expressionless black dots represented eyes. A simple message adorned the back of the sign.

Kilroy was here.

"Where did you find this?" Connell said through clenched teeth. He kept his voice down, so as not to draw the attention of Veronica and Sanji. They were exploring the Picture Cavern, the tall Lashon close by, looking everywhere for any sign of danger.

"Lybrand found it dead center in the middle of the Picture Cavern," O'Doyle said. "It was wedged into a crack in the rock floor."

"Did anyone else see it?"

"Only Mack. Lybrand immediately brought it to me and I stashed it away."

"Is there any chance that one of the others put it there before she and Mack arrived?"

"Of course it's a possibility, sir, but I doubt it. She walked point and was the first one in the Picture Cavern. She's armed and kept everyone else behind her, including Mack."

"Could Jansson have put this here?"

O'Doyle mulled over the question. "I suppose he could have, but according to Angus's map none of the tunnels from the chasm lead to the Picture Cavern. Besides, he couldn't have brought the sign with him, or Mack would have seen it. There's not exactly any hiding space in these suits."

Connell looked at his own bright-yellow, form-fitting KoolSuit. The things clung so tight you could tell a man's religion. He glanced back at O'Doyle, who looked like a muscle-bulging superhero in the tight yellow outfit, the Hulk with a beer belly. Jansson couldn't have slipped the sign past Mack. Someone else beat EarthCore into the caverns, and that someone was a smart ass who wanted Connell to know he'd been beat.

Kilroy was here.

"This sign rings a bell," Connell said. "Do you know what it means?"

"Allied forces, especially U.S. forces, saw that image all over Europe as they liberated the continent from the Nazis in World War Two. No one ever found out who was responsible. Forward allied forces pushed back the Germans, and many times this sign would be waiting. Someone was so bent on being a joker they actually crept across enemy lines and painted graffiti."

O'Doyle looked over his shoulder, making sure that no one was near. "I've got something else." He reached into an ammo pouch and pulled out a small, pale object.

At first glance Connell thought it was a stone or a piece of hard, dried food. Then in an instant he recognized the object. He managed to keep an expression of neutrality despite his revulsion.

Although it was dried as if it had been dropped into a dehydrator, there was no mistaking a severed human thumb.

The nail looked remarkably undamaged. Just behind the nail, however, where the first knuckle starts, the thumb stopped. Dirt, sand, and even one small pebble stuck to the stump. A thin piece of bone protruded past the flesh, a dull white in the poor lighting of the cavern.

"Where did you find this?" Connell hissed.

"Down in the chasm where Jansson turned up missing." O'Doyle's fingers flexed on the handle of his H&K. "I think it was cut off during a struggle. Someone bagged Jansson, then removed his body."

"We have to get everyone to the surface," Connell said, striving to keep his voice calm. "Why on earth did you let everyone come down here?"

"We needed people to help find Jansson," O'Doyle said, eyes flitting up one end of the cavern and down the next. "Besides, you said it was urgent we continue toward the Dense Mass. Don't worry, Mr. Kirkland. We have plenty of firepower down here, and Lybrand is under specific instructions not to let the miners out of her sight."

Connell stared at O'Doyle with a sudden, sinking feeling. The man *wanted* to shoot something. Anything. Anything that could have remotely been responsible for this action. O'Doyle wanted that enemy to show itself.

"Mr. O'Doyle, where are all of our people? How far are they from the elevator?"

"Lybrand, Mack, and the six fresh miners are exploring the tunnels around the chasm," O'Doyle said in his rapid-fire military tone. "I'd say they're about twenty-five minutes away from the elevator. The five remaining miners from Mack's morning crew are probably already there, waiting to head up. You, me, Lashon and the professors are the only ones in the Picture Cavern. Except for Jansson, all crew are present and accounted for."

Connell quickly did the math. The Picture Cavern was forty-five minutes from the elevator shaft, Mack's party was closer to the shaft, only twenty-five minutes away. Mack's crew could get back and head up, then send the elevator back down just about the time Connell and the others reached the shaft. From there it would *still* be a twenty-minute wait. But if there was some danger, at least Mack's party would get back to the surface.

"Get everyone back to the elevator," Connell said. "And do it *now*. I want all of our people back immediately."

Something was very wrong within the narrow stone tunnels and sprawling caverns, and Connell's instincts told him it was only going to get worse.

12:32 a.m.

Mack moved in a half crouch, helmeted head scraping lightly against the stone ceiling. They were exploring the last of the tunnels that led from the chasm where Jansson had disappeared. Mack's anger accompanied his exhaustion—they were running out of places to look.

"How you holding up, Mr. Hendricks?" Lybrand asked. She always stayed only a step behind him, surprisingly agile in the narrow tunnels. Fritz and two more miners followed Lybrand.

"No worries," Mack said, but in truth his thoughts held nothing *but* worries.

click-click ... click

"Hey," Mack said. "Did you hear that?"

"I did," Lybrand said. "What is it?"

Up ahead, something moved.

Mack's anger instantly vanished, a blank stare replacing his focused thought process. What he saw railed against all he knew. They were well over two miles underground, for crying out loud. No animals lived that deep.

But he'd seen it. He'd seen something move.

Something that wasn't human.

The word *spider* popped into his head, although he didn't have time to count the legs. He'd only seen it for all of a second, maybe two, as it darted through the circle of light cast by his headlamp. It flashed in the light, leaving a definite impression of *metal*. A two-foot-long, shiny spider.

"Did you see that?" He asked Lybrand, who stood rigidly with her H&K pointed down the tunnel.

"Yes," she whispered. "What the fuck was it?"

"You got me, mate."

"I saw it, too," Fritz said. "Looked like a big silver bug."

The group stood rock-still. They crouched over slightly at the waist; the ceiling wasn't quite high enough to allow them to stand, not quite low enough to force a crawl. The tunnel suddenly seemed darker, more enclosed—like a trap.

A sudden burst of walkie-talkie static made them all jump.

"Lybrand here," she said into the handset.

"This is O'Doyle," the other voice called. "Report back to the cavern immediately." He sounded scratchy, faint, and full of static. The walkie-talkies had a pitifully short range in the tunnels.

"Any sign of Jansson?" she asked.

"Not yet. Report back immediately. The second the elevator touches down, you send everybody back up, including Bill Cook, and have them send the elevator back down the second they reach the surface. You guard the elevator shaft. We'll catch up to you a few minutes before it touches down again."

"Got it," Lybrand said, then put the walkie-talkie back in her belt. "Okay everyone, we're out of here, let's move."

"But we haven't found Jansson," Fritz said. "We can't just leave! What about those silver bug things?"

Lybrand nodded. "I don't know what those are, but we've been ordered out, so let's move. There's some danger down here, Fritz. I'm sure we're coming back down later."

Part of Mack wanted to support Fritz, argue to stay down and continue the search for Jansson. Another part of him, a much stronger part, wanted to get the hell out of there. Things weren't supposed to be able to live down here. Even if they were, he doubted they looked like spiders.

Two-foot-long, shiny spiders.

Mack turned his crew around and they headed back for the cavern, much faster than they'd come.

12:34 a.m.

While O'Doyle gave his orders, Veronica and Sanji walked along the Picture Cavern's far edge, an amazed Lashon in tow.

"Let me get this straight," Lashon said in his deep baritone voice. "You're saying that this room is one big textbook?"

"I think so," Veronica said. She looked about the room, wondering why she hadn't seen it immediately. The ten-by-ten relief carvings covered the majority of the Picture Cavern's space. Thousands of them tiled the walls with even rows of perfect illustrations. A juniper tree here. A tribesman with a spear there. Cactus. Grasshoppers. Tentacle gods. Mountains. A wolf. A bow. Arrows flying. Everything that could possibly make up life in this area of the world was represented in one place or another along the walls.

Sanji stared dumbly. "Oh my goodness. This isn't religious at all. This is a classroom."

"So it seems," Veronica said. "We are very deep in the mountain, after all, and we can only assume that the culture somehow lived down here. We know their

visits to the surface were limited—some of them possibly never saw the surface at all. It's possible they used these carvings to teach their children what things looked like up on the surface."

"But how did they live down here?" Sanji asked. "It's 170 degrees Fahrenheit. We can only tolerate this temperature with the KoolSuits. You are suggesting that people lived their entire lives down here?"

"Maybe the climate was different," Veronica said. "Maybe thousands of years ago it wasn't this hot at all. Is it possible they had some genetic or dietary way to deal with the temperature? Eskimos have so much blubber in their diet they build up huge body-fat percentages; it helps them tolerate very cold temperatures. Maybe the Chaltelians had a similar adaptive strategy."

"If it is dietary, what do they eat?" Sanji asked. "It would have to be something not yet seen. If it was genetic, they would be radically different from any human we've seen, but it is possible they have some mutation that would have allowed them to tolerate such high temperatures. Doubtful, but still a possibility. Such a mutation would have allowed them to exploit this environmental niche."

Veronica stared at the carvings. The pictures were starting to take shape in her mind, adding to her understanding. "It looks as if they read right to left, and bottom to top." She touched a tile representing a tentacle god. Her fingers cast strange shadows from the light of her helmet-lamp, making the tentacle god seem to wriggle with life.

"I think they read via groupings," Sanji said. "Like we use sentences to convey one idea, they use groups."

"What do you mean?"

"See this tiny, patterned line around this set of four pictures?" Sanji said, pointing to the wall. Veronica's eyes widened as she registered the many patterned lines connecting the boxes into various groups.

"Yes, you see it now," Sanji said with a smile. "These grouped pictures tell a complicated little story. Look at the first picture." Sanji pointed to a tentacle god standing at the mouth of a cave. "See the clouds? Anytime they wanted to represent the surface, they put in clouds. Now see the next picture?" He pointed one carving to the left, a beautiful work showing a tautly muscled tribesman carrying a spear. Veronica followed the next group to the left—the tribesman plunging the spear into a tentacle god. The next picture disturbed her greatly; three tentacle gods holding the distinct crescent knives, hacking away at the tribesman, cutting him to pieces.

"Looks like they're some bad motherfuckers," Lashon said.

Veronica absently rubbed her chin. "So this is a story of what happens if you go against the tentacle gods' will."

All three headlamp beams illuminated the second to last picture. They could see the detail; a severed hand flying through the air, tentacle gods wielding the crescent-knives, the expression of pain and horror on the tribesman's face. The last tile showed the tentacle gods burying the tribesman's remains. Veronica felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach.

"It's a punishment," Veronica said. "What they did to the miners and what they did at Cerro Chaltel. It's their religion. Someone transgresses against the tribe, the tribe slaughters the transgressor. They hack them to bits, then bury them. The

tribesmen acted out the will of their gods." She felt sick with discovery. A piece of the puzzle she'd labored on for five years was finally answered—she now knew why the tribes wreaked such havoc.

"So this appears to be some of their laws," she said. "I wonder what law Jessup and the miners broke?"

"That one seems obvious." Sanji walked to another carving. "Look here, see these top four rows? All of the picture groups start with a tribesman or animal at the mouth of a cave. And the next picture shows that individual moving into the caves."

Veronica followed the picture groups to the left—each one showed the tribesman or animal being hacked to pieces by the tentacle gods. Her eyes scanned the wall, examining the "punishment" carving groups. Many seemed repetitive; mostly tribesmen, who were perhaps Plains Indians—Utes or Hopis, maybe—moving into the caves before being butchered.

"So it was sacrilege to come into the mountain if you were not part of the tribe," Sanji said. "Death was the punishment for such a transgression."

"Gives me the willies," Lashon said. "The mountain is holy ground, and anybody who comes inside is killed. Think about it. Aren't we transgressors, too?"

No one answered.

O'Doyle strode toward them, gun in hand. Lashon straightened up and stood at attention. O'Doyle's voice sounded deep and commanding. "We have to leave immediately, professors."

"What for?" Veronica said. "We're in the middle of something very important."

"We're returning to the elevator as fast as possible," O'Doyle said politely. "There's danger down here and Connell wants everyone back at the elevator shaft ASAP."

Veronica's hands went to her hips. "Well, I really don't care what *Mr. Kirkland* said! He can't just boss us around, you know. He can't make us come back."

O'Doyle let out a tired sigh. "Maybe Mr. Kirkland can't order you or make you," he said, his voice still polite. "But he can order me. And I assure you, professors, I *can* make you obey."

She was about to say something indignant when Sanji firmly gripped her elbow and pulled her toward the tunnel leading back to the shaft. Veronica cast a quick glance at Sanji, who returned the gaze and simply shook his head "no." She opened her mouth to speak once more, then looked at O'Doyle's grim demeanor and shut her mouth. She let Sanji lead her out of the Picture Cavern.

12:37 a.m.

The figures danced across the computer screen in front of Katerina and Achmed. Both scientists stared in bewilderment, then shook their heads.

"That's impossible," Achmed said.

Katerina shook her head in denial of what her eyes told her. She thought for a moment, pondering the results and what it meant if they were accurate. It was mind-boggling—and entirely unacceptable.

"How long did it take us to run that equation?" Katerina asked.

"Thirty-five minutes."

"Can we shorten it up at all?"

"We can't," Achmed said. "If we think there's a mistake in these results, we have to reenter everything from scratch, assume we made an error in the entry somewhere."

Katerina pondered that option. If the data was accurate, she needed to alert Connell immediately. But it just didn't make sense. There was no way the data could be accurate. It was a mistake. It had to be. "Run it again," she said. "And let's make sure we do it right this time."

1:01 a.m.

Kayla slid silently through the shadows. A strong breeze blew sand across the camp. The canvas covering the Quonset huts rolled with soft flapping noises.

She knelt next to the miners' hut, sitting perfectly still, eyes slowly scanning the area. People were moving, but they were all preoccupied with their tasks. They'd been here long enough that no one bothered to look around anymore—the camp had become familiar to their eyes.

Kayla watched the limited camp traffic for five more minutes, then slid to the hut's rear window and peaked in. Six miners inside, every last one of them sleeping so soundly they might as well have been passed out. Kayla smiled, amazed at the ease of it all. Without O'Doyle and Connell around, discipline slacked off considerably. She probably wouldn't have even risked this excursion if O'Doyle wasn't in the tunnels. The miners' expensive KoolSuits sat in limp piles on the floor or draped over tables.

Kayla watched for a few more minutes. Nothing moved. She slowly opened the hut's back door and slid inside. Six sleeping men. She could kill them all if she wanted to. Kill them all without a noise. But she wasn't there to kill anyone.

She quietly gathered up a KoolSuit and slid out of the hut. They'd certainly miss the suit. This time O'Doyle might even search the hills and find her warren. But she needed only a peek into the tunnels, and that was the last bit of information she needed before selling to the highest bidder. She'd try and penetrate the tunnels in a few hours, perhaps at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., her last action on this mission. If she could get in, great; if not, she was still in her Land Rover and out of the area by 6:00 a.m.

And a few hours after that, the bids would start rolling in.

Chapter 21

1:17 a.m.

Achmed and Katerina were bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, and more than a little exhausted, but they knew they hadn't made a mistake. They'd checked the figures twice, and for the second time the equation produced the same results.

"Holy shit," was all Katerina could say.

"Yes," Achmed said quietly, eyes wide and fixed on the screen. "Holy shit."

It made no sense. No sense at all. But that wasn't the point right now. Why or how didn't really matter—*when* was obvious, and it demanded instant action.

Katerina turned and bolted from the lab, Achmed close behind, their fatigue evaporating in a flash of urgency. She screamed to a guard to bring a Jeep around. They jumped in, and sped off toward the adit opening. It would take them at least twenty minutes to reach the adit, including the time spent on foot getting up the slope. At the adit was the shaft phone, the only way to reach Connell.

She grabbed the driver's walkie-talkie and radioed a message ahead to the guard at the adit mouth. Hopefully he could pass on the message in time.

1:19 a.m.

Kayla watched the two scientists burst from the lab, hop in the Jeep and make a beeline for the mine. The expressions on their faces screamed of something seriously wrong. She picked off their message to the guard at the mouth of the adit. Katerina Hayes wanted everyone out of the mine pronto. But why? Cave-in? Underground water? Poison gas? Kayla didn't know. She couldn't pick up any signals from inside the mine, as they were using that direct-line phone. What went on inside that mountain remained a mystery to her.

Things were certainly getting interesting.

1:21 a.m.

Despite Sanji's slow pace, Connell's tired party made it back to the elevator shaft in only forty minutes. Connell stopped dead in his tracks when he saw not only Lybrand, but Mack and Fritz Sherwood as well.

Mack lay exhausted in the powdery dirt, looking like a bomb-blast victim, an H&K resting across his chest. Fritz leaned against the edge of the elevator shaft. His face had a grayish pallor, like that of a sick man.

Lybrand just looked embarrassed.

O'Doyle looked at the two prone men, then at Lybrand. "I told you to send them up," he said in a quiet, angry voice. "I was very specific."

"They wouldn't go," Lybrand said. "They insisted on waiting until everyone got back, in case someone found Jansson."

"That's my man that's lost down here," Mack said. "I'm not leaving him behind."

Connell stepped forward, brushed past O'Doyle, and stared down at Mack.

"He's not *your* man, he's *my* man," Connell said. "You're all *mine*, you all work for me, and if you ever disobey another order you'll find yourself on a plane back to Australia faster than you can think."

"I was with him when he was hurt," Fritz said. "I have to be the last one down here, that's the least I can do."

Connell turned on him. "What you can do is pack your bags. I need Mack, I don't need you. You're fired."

Fritz started to speak, but looked too damn tired to protest. He leaned his head back against the rock and closed his eyes.

The elevator door's light changed from an "up" arrow to a "down" arrow—it was on its way. Connell checked his watch: twenty more minutes until he could get everyone to safety. Everyone had to just sit tight until then, and they'd all go up together. With everyone safely on the surface, Connell would rethink the situation. Jansson's disappearance, more importantly the severed thumb, hammered home a fact he'd missed for a long time—no amount of money was worth risking lives. He had placed the importance of finding the Dense Mass over his people's safety. Connell now realized how screwed up he was, how he'd let self-pity warp his priorities. He didn't like the revelation, not one bit.

Maybe Jansson was a spy, but probably not. Either way, someone got to Jansson, then dragged him away. O'Doyle said there was no doubt Jansson was dead—the blood splatters on the wall made that quite clear. Whoever took out Jansson wouldn't hesitate to kill again. Connell had to get his people out of there. Then he would reorganize, come down with a fully armed, fully rested, and fully prepared team. The delay could cost him the Dense Mass—but it also might save lives.

The surface phone buzzed loudly.

Connell grabbed the black handset mounted on the wall. "Kirkland here."

"Mr. Kirkland, this is Bill Cook," the voice answered. "I'm up at the adit mouth. We just got a radio message from Dr. Hayes. She's on her way up here now to talk to you directly."

"What was the message?"

"She said to get everyone out of the mine immediately," Cook said. "She said it was urgent."

Connell's grip tightened on the handset. The knot in his stomach tightened as well. He suddenly realized he had to piss very badly.

"Tell her we're already doing that, Mr. Cook. And get her on the phone the second she arrives. And do not, I repeat, do *not* send anyone else down, is that clear?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Kirkland."

Connell hung up. Veronica, Sanji, Lybrand, O'Doyle, Mack, Lashon, and Fritz all looked at him. Their lives were in danger, and it was his fault. Connell checked his watch. Something bad was brewing, all right. He just hoped it would stay away for another eighteen minutes.

From far above, he heard the faint, hollow, metallic echoes of the descending elevator.

1:24 a.m.

Sonny now understood how a rabbit felt just before the bobcat's fatal bite. He lay on his bunk, shaking. Fear festered in his gut like a worm in the bottom of a tequila bottle, white and soft and disgusting.

That creeping feeling, the one that had grown steadily worse ever since he'd arrived at Funeral Mountain, was now so intense he could barely stand it. But he was safe inside the Quonset hut. Wasn't he?

The image of the crude cave drawing popped unbidden into his head. It *meant* something, but what? What did it mean to Anderson and the other geology

students back in 1942? Sonny wondered if the students felt as he did now. He wondered if Jessup's people had felt it—and ignored it.

Sonny's eyes bolted wide and his breath locked up tight. Jessup. The newspaper article. The cave drawing's significance suddenly slammed home with the weight of an avalanche.

Sonofabitch.

He sat up in his bed, eyes darting about the room like prey trying to spot a lurking predator. Sonny threw on his backpack and ran for the door. Screw the Hummer, screw the money, and screw that sonofabitch Kirkland. He'd send for the Hummer later, it didn't really matter at the moment. He had enough supplies in his backpack to get him to Milford. That trip would be a stupid venture for most people, but after forty years in the desert he knew he could make it easily. Sonny pushed open the door of the hut with one hand, the other hand furiously thumbing the Hopi charm on his belt.

1:28 a.m.

Katerina and Achmed gasped for breath as they reached the adit. Normally the short walk up the path was strenuous but manageable. Sprinting up the incline, however, was a different story.

Cook handed the phone to her when she reached the top, Connell already waiting on the other end. The first load of miners was walking out of the adit—the elevator was already heading back down.

"Mr. Kirkland!"

"What's the news, Dr. Hayes?"

"Oh my god! Get everyone out of there now!"

"We're doing that Dr. Hayes, but the elevator only moves so fast. Calm down and tell me what's going on."

Katerina stooped over at the waist, one hand on a knee and the other holding the handset to her ear. She took a big breath and tried to control her heaving stomach. "Those anomalies we talked about. You remember?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, there was another one since you went below. Achmed and I ran some numbers on the readings. The time between the epicenters and the readings match data for tunneling through that same amount of rock. We're almost sure the anomalies were cave-ins caused by open-face blasting and natural fall-away. The path heads straight for the top of the shaft! There's no question, it's not a natural occurrence!"

Connell paused. "Tell me that again so I know I heard you right, Dr. Hayes. And this time in English."

Katerina took a deep, pulling breath, then answered. "The cave-ins weren't natural. They were man-made. Someone is digging their way out of the mountain, and they're coming straight for the shaft."

1:30 a.m.

Connell huddled Mack, Veronica, Sanji and Fritz near the edge of the elevator platform. Veronica and Sanji stood nervously, while Mack and Fritz just lay in the powdery silt. Fritz was sound asleep, apparently unconcerned with his recent firing. Connell couldn't blame Fritz and Mack; they'd been in the scorching tunnels for over twelve hours, crawling, climbing, searching.

O'Doyle, Lybrand, and Lashon stood twenty feet farther down the tunnel, their backs to the others, their guns ready to fire. They blocked any access from the caves to the elevator.

"Connell," Veronica said loudly. "Would you *please* tell us what the hell is going on?"

"It's probably nothing, Dr. Reeves," Connell said, staring up the elevator shaft and checking his watch for the tenth time in the last two minutes.

"Nothing? Oh, then maybe you can tell me why there are armed guards with machine guns pointing down the tunnel?"

Connell sighed. Might as well tell them, they'd find out eventually. "A miner, Brian Jansson, came up missing, as you already know. We have reason to believe there's someone else down here. This other party may have hurt or even killed Jansson. We have to get everyone to the surface and now."

Veronica said nothing, perhaps suddenly realizing how precarious their situation could be. Over two miles underground there was only one way to safety. For once at least, Connell noted, she stopped talking.

The elevator echoes were louder now, a sound marking the teasing promise of safety. He checked his watch, then looked back up the elevator shaft. Far up the shaft, he thought he could see the bottom of the elevator.

1:32 a.m.

Katerina, Achmed, and Cook sprinted through the adit toward the shaft mouth. Her legs screamed and her breath came in burning gasps—she'd have to get in shape when all this was over. She'd spent too much time in a lab parked on her behind.

She felt the rumble before she heard the horrible, grinding noise of falling rock. She tried to stop, but lost her footing on the loose gravel and fell hard. Her knee took most of the fall, sending hot pain shooting up her leg. She looked up to see Achmed clumsily hit the ground, then spring back up. Cook helped her to her feet and they started forward again.

Strange noises shot down the narrow adit toward them. The sound of hammering on rock and metal filled the air. Other sounds filtered through as well, sounds she couldn't quite place, sounds that chilled her soul. If she hadn't already been sprinting forward with the others, she would have turned and run the other way.

That would have been the wisest choice she ever made, but for Katerina Hayes, it was already too late.

1:39 a.m.

The din of the lowering elevator drowned out all sound from the top of the shaft. Connell heard nothing except the grinding of gears and squeaks of metal. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Nothing that is, until the snap.

The group had been nervously talking among themselves, waiting for the elevator to arrive. The “snap” was a sudden, painfully sharp screech of metal that echoed incessantly through the long shaft. Conversation ended instantly. A brief second passed where all seemed to wait, turning to look up the elevator shaft, to see the cause of the noise.

Connell saw the danger first. The elevator was on its way, all right, but quite a bit faster than normal and tilting to one side, lightly scraping against the smooth shaft wall with a blazing orange stream of sparks.

“Run!” Connell screamed, turning and sprinting away from the shaft. For once nobody said anything; they just turned and bolted down the tunnel in a mad scramble for safety.

O'Doyle and Lashon waited until Connell, Veronica, Mack, and Sanji passed their position. Just as they turned to follow them, O'Doyle looked back and realized they were one head short.

“Fritz!” O'Doyle screamed. Fritz was still asleep, oblivious of the noise and the danger. His eyes fluttered open and he weakly lifted his head. O'Doyle started forward, but the younger Lashon was much faster, sprinting the twenty feet to the elevator with long, powerful strides.

The elevator, cut free from its supporting cable, twisted on the way down. One side caught the wall; the elevator flipped and tumbled down the shaft, filling the tunnels with the horrid, deafening screech of metal on rock. Amplified by the narrow space and rock walls, the painful noises sounded like a demon erupting from hell.

“Lashon, no!” O'Doyle shouted, but it was too late. Just as the tall man reached Fritz and threw an arm around his waist, the elevator slammed into the bottom of the shaft. Five tons of metal hit the ground at terminal velocity, smashing like a bomb blast. The ground shuddered. Bits of rock crumbled from the ceiling. Everyone hit the deck—some voluntarily, while some simply fell from the impact tremors. Thick clouds of dust and dirt billowed forth from the bottom of the elevator shaft, filling the tunnel with choking darkness.

1:40 a.m.

Kayla trained her binoculars on the adit mouth. No sign of the guard and the two scientists. She panned back down to the camp, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. The exhausted-looking miners were filtering back into their Quonset. Almost everyone remained asleep, except for four guards who patrolled diligently, fully-automatic HK416 rifle with 30-round magazines at the ready.

Apparently playtime was over. She'd be extra careful if she had to go into the camp again. It had all been fun and games, but now if she made one mistake and someone opened up with one of the H&Ks, she'd be dead in a second. That had made the game much more challenging. She panned back to the adit. Something interesting was going on in there. Something interesting indeed.

1:41 a.m.

Katerina hadn't quite reached the end of the adit when it happened. The blow to her knee slowed her. She felt a jagged chip of limestone grinding away under her skin, and she couldn't keep up with Achmed and the guard.

Up ahead the guard saw something, yelled in fear, then let loose with the H&K. The roar of automatic weapon fire tore through the air. The deafening sound filled the small tunnel, so loud that she put her hands to her ears and screamed, her eyes closed and her face scrunched in fear and confusion. The firing stopped suddenly—a splatter of something hot and wet hit her face. She wiped it away, then opened her eyes.

It was blood.

She stared at her red-smeared hands. She didn't know if it was the guard's blood or Achmed's blood and she never got the chance to find out. A noise up ahead drew her attention back down the adit. A noise like dead leaves rattling across concrete.

The way it *moved*. It was something that would take her mind several seconds to comprehend, to accept.

She didn't even have that long.

A crescent-shaped platinum knife flashed out, slashing her abdomen and nearly cutting her in half. She gasped in fear, at least tried to, but it was impossible with her diaphragm separated from her lungs. She hit the ground, eyes still fixed on the horrible, flashing, waving thing that was killing her.

1:43 a.m.

Through her binoculars, Kayla watched a small, metallic shape crawl from the adit mouth. It looked like a spider, but with only four legs. She adjusted the focus, trying to identify the strange creature. As she gazed in confusion, multicolored lights seemed to flash from inside the adit.

The spider moved aside, and Kayla's jaw dropped in astonishment, confusion, and fear. Bizarre creatures, each slightly bigger than a man, rushed out of the adit, past the spider, and spilled down the mountain, soft bodies and boneless limbs giving them a graceful, fluid movement. She couldn't say they *ran*, because the word *running* wasn't exactly right. Perhaps *flowing* was a more fitting description. Hundreds of them poured down the incline with speed and purpose, racing towards the camp. Their colors flashed brilliantly in the night, lighting up the ground before them with an angry, multicolored intensity, oranges and reds and yellows playing off the rocky limestone slope and dirt path.

They looked like a thick, glowing medicine ball with tentacles, three on the bottom that acted as legs, three on the top—juxtaposed above the spaces between the lower tentacles—that looked like arms. The top tentacles, the arms, held long, strangely curved metal objects, obviously some kind of knife.

She was speechless. *Thoughtless*, in fact, as she watched them hit the camp like a tidal wave. The first guard barely saw them coming, he managed a single burst from his H&K, and then they were on him, hacking and cutting and tearing.

His shots alerted the other guards, one of whom hit the general alarm. Every light in the camp instantly burst on to the accompaniment of a blaring Klaxon. The remaining guards on duty ran toward the shots, weapons at the ready.

The guard who'd hit the alarm turned the corner of the lab just as four of the flowing, flashing creatures reached the building. The guard stared, frozen. They moved so quickly he never even got a shot off. They swarmed on him like piranha, obscuring him from her view. Body parts and great gouts of blood flew through the air, splattering an alarming red against the building's white walls.

1:45 a.m.

From his vantage point at the main gate, Cho watched in horror as the sickening, glowing creatures hacked Frank Hutchins into a dozen pieces, his blood splattering in long streaks against the white lab building walls.

Jessup's demons, he thought with clarity he found odd, considering the insane situation that danced before his eyes. *He wasn't crazy after all—they're real.*

The main gate was the camp's farthest point away from the mine adit. Cho hid behind a boulder, cringing at the way the creatures lit up the night, glowing and pulsing like some twisted, squishy string of Christmas lights. The way they *moved*, so fluid, so *boneless*, like no living thing he'd ever seen, except maybe for a jellyfish or a sea slug.

The Klaxon blared. Cho waited, hoping some miracle might allow Frank to emerge alive from the horrific pile of demons. Blood flew. Cho watched in dumbstruck awe as one of Frank's feet tumbled across the sand.

Jesus, Frank.

Cho opened up on full automatic. The demons shuddered under the attack, quivering in instant death throes, and fell to the ground in lifeless heaps.

Hundreds of the things raged through the camp. The bizarre conflict was already over. Cho's brief battle with his fight-or-flight response ended quickly. He turned and sprinted out the main gate and down the sloping road.

It was only a few flashes of red, yellow, and orange that let him know something was behind him. Still running, he threw a glance over his shoulder but couldn't get a good look at it.

Cho turned and ran backward, firing on full automatic. Screaming, he emptied the magazine into the glowing thing, but it kept coming. It whip-snapped a glowing tentacle—something metallic flew through the air. He ducked, but felt a slicing pain in his shoulder.

His H&K was empty, the trigger making useless clicking noises. The thing was still coming, now only ten feet away. Cho pulled his pearl-handled .45 and squeezed off three rounds—all hits. Whatever the hell it was, it dropped in a lifeless heap on the sandy ground, its mysterious light instantly fading away, leaving a boneless gray corpse behind. He turned and ran before the thing even stopped twitching.

He only made it about two hundred yards when his vision grew spotty. He slowed and looked at his shoulder—blood covered his entire arm, glistening in the moonlight. He stumbled, tried to catch himself, but fell to the ground. His head smacked loudly into a rock.

He lay still.

1:47 a.m.

They swarmed over the camp, pouring in, around, and over buildings. Screams, male and female, filled the night air along with the creatures' odd sounds. Odd, angry, aggressive sounds. It reminded Kayla vaguely of screeching car tires on hot summer asphalt, but with many different pitches and tones.

The guard barracks burst open. The off-duty guards, dragged from sleep by the blaring Klaxons, came out firing. They ran toward the oncoming mob, firing on full automatic all the way. Somewhere in her mind, it surprised Kayla that the things could be hit, could bleed, could fall in a lifeless heap on the desert floor. Something flew through the air and smashed the forward guard's head like a rotten melon. He dropped instantly, body jittering in the throes of death, a fist-sized rock buried in his skull.

The guards stayed together in a loose line for as long as they could, but within seconds the creatures swarmed over them like army ants. The hacking began.

Kayla lost count, both of dead EarthCore people and of the things that had poured from the mountain. Isolated gunfire continued for several minutes, as did the creatures' screeches. Human screams, so prevalent in the first few minutes of the conflict, quickly died out.

Someone made it into the equipment shed. A Land Rover ripped through the garage door in a splintering cloud of wood and metal, camp lights flashing off the green paint and the blue EarthCore logo. One of the creatures stood defiantly in the vehicle's path, tentacles waving in psychotic scarlets and murderous yellows. The Land Rover plowed into the creature, which splattered on the grille like a water balloon dropped from twenty stories up. Impressions of gooey orange blood registered in Kayla's brain, but she couldn't be sure of the color under the garish camp lights. The Land Rover turned hard to the right, heading for the downslope gate, trying to escape the camp. The creatures hurled rocks at the vehicle. A dozen or more bounced off every side like wind-driven hail. One finally hit the front windshield, shattering it.

The Rover swerved violently toward the diesel fuel tank. Kayla watched in awe as the Rover smashed through the tank's walls, sending ten thousand gallons of diesel splashing through the camp.

She didn't know how long the battle went on. Gunfire echoed through the camp as someone fought desperately for life. A last human scream punctuated the chaos—the gunfire ceased.

The creatures' clicks and screeches dominated the night's roaring sounds. They freely moved through the camp, setting fire to everything that would burn—including the spilled gas. Flames shot into the night sky as the creatures tore down the light poles and knocked down walls. As they attacked every structure, the Klaxons dropped off one by one until the alarm vanished, leaving only the crackling fire and the creatures' strange noises. Flickering orange lit the camp. Kayla watched, barely able to believe what she saw, as the creatures screamed their victory to the night. They crowded near to the flames; so close they had to be blistering from the raging heat. They continued to scream, the sounds of hundreds

of tires skidding across open pavement. Kayla sat in her camouflaged warren, paralyzed, unmoving. But the show was far from over.

Explosions ripped from the equipment shed as vehicles succumbed to fire. The diesel fuel continued to burn, still the brightest light in the camp. There were more of the creatures now, hundreds of them, their soft bodies moving to and fro in the demolished camp. The creatures butchered the human corpses, cutting them up into smaller and smaller pieces, then burying the diced remains.

After what could have been minutes or several hours—Kayla had lost all concept of time—the fires began to die down. The creatures seemed sluggish, tired perhaps, but they continued to work. They tore down the blackened Quonset huts, burying the pieces deep in the desert sand.

The first rays of sun illuminated the morning sky with a light the color of a glowing coal. As a unit, the creatures headed for the slope, dragging their dead along with them. Most moved very slowly, some so weak they had to be dragged up by others. They tackled the incline and entered the adit. Kayla watched in rapt attention, unable to look away as they slowly moved out of sight. When the last one disappeared into the adit, she turned her attention back to the camp.

But there was no camp. Kayla lowered her binoculars; with normal sight she could barely tell there had ever been a camp at all. With the binocs, she could see the lumpy remains of a few buildings, the diesel tank's sand-covered concrete footing, here and there a small piece of torn metal reflecting the morning sun. But for the most part the camp had simply ceased to exist.

She wondered if she should move farther away from the camp, but she knew the monsters hadn't seen her. That much was obvious—they destroyed everything and everyone in sight, but they'd never come for her. She decided to keep her location—they'd missed her once, if they came out a second time, they'd likely miss her again.

Her mind finally clicked back into gear. Opportunity? She'd come to the desert looking for it, and now here it was. Much more opportunity than she'd ever dreamed. Screw the South Africans, screw the Russians, and screw the platinum. They offered only money, and money couldn't buy her what she wanted most in the world.

She didn't know what, exactly, she had just witnessed, but she knew damn well no one had witnessed it before. What were those things, some kind of monster? An experiment? Aliens? They couldn't be aliens—what race intelligent enough to use space travel would use knives to attack automatic weapons? Whatever the creatures were, they were primitive. And, in truth, it didn't matter *what* they were, not for her purposes, anyway.

Because whatever they were, they were her ticket back into the NSA.

Kayla felt joy wash over her. She flipped on the COMSEC unit and jammed all frequencies. She programmed it to break jamming every fifteen minutes and do a five-second scan of all frequencies—if someone made it out of camp, they'd probably call for help. For her sudden and inspired plan to work, she had to make sure no one got away.

BOOK IV

The Tunnels.

Chapter 22

3:15 a.m.

11,307 feet below the surface.

A film of dust lingered in the still air, seemingly suspended by magic, defying gravity's pull. The thick dust flew in visible swirls when anyone coughed, which was often. The only light came from headlamps attached to helmets; the crash had cut off all electricity from the surface. The headlamp beams swerved back and forth through the dusty tunnel, feeble attempts at illuminating the hungry and endless darkness.

A hundred yards away from the shaft bottom the party tried to come to grips with the situation. Sitting in silence, they waited for Mack to return from his evaluation of the ravaged shaft. O'Doyle had insisted Connell, Veronica, and Sanji stay back, under Lybrand's watchful eye, while he and Mack searched the rubble for Fritz and Lashon. Exhausted, all had fallen asleep while waiting. All except for Lybrand, who stood tall, eyes methodically sweeping up one side of the tunnel, then the next.

She heard Mack and O'Doyle returning, and woke the others. Connell felt like he'd been hit with a truck. He blinked away the sleep and stood.

Mack returned, O'Doyle at his side with his H&K at the ready, all eyes turned hopefully toward them. O'Doyle slowly shook his head from side to side, a pained, grim expression on his face.

"You saw them?" Sanji asked.

Mack nodded. "Lashon and Fritz are dead," he said. "They didn't stand a chance."

Silence once again filled the tunnels. Someone coughed, and dust swirled.

Connell closed his eyes tightly. Two more dead. Three men, gone, because of his obsession. What would Cori think of him now? He wanted to curl up in a ball and die. Or maybe put the H&K barrel in his mouth, and simply pull the trigger.

"How bad is the shaft?" Connell asked. The rest of the party sat quietly, hanging on Mack's every word.

"We're in a world of shit, Mr. Kirkland," Mack said. "There was quite a bit of cave-in damage. Judging from the amount of rock that's spilled out of the shaft, the crash sealed off at least the bottom one hundred feet. It could be more, maybe a lot more—it's impossible to say from down here."

"What does that mean?" Veronica asked. "How long will it take them to dig us out?"

"Dig us out with what, Professor?" Mack said. "Without the elevator they can't lift loose rock out of the shaft. I found a few parts scattered around the cave—some of them were from the main winch mechanism. It wasn't just the platform that came down, it was the whole fucking thing."

"How long will it take to repair it?" Veronica asked, fear palpable in her voice and eyes.

"Repair it with what?" Mack said, again answering with a question. "They've got spare parts up there, but the whole winch came down. They can't build one of those from scratch. Even if they hit the panic button and have EarthCore fly in another winch, we're talking at least a day to acquire the machinery, a day to ship it out here if the helicopter flies nonstop, and then at least a day to install it and start winching out the rock. From there it depends on how much rock they have to remove."

Veronica's eyes cast downward, the circle of light from her helmet illuminating the dirt at her feet.

Mack continued. "And that estimate is only if they can simply put another elevator in, which I doubt. If the whole winch came down, then most likely so did much of the ceiling above the shaft. They'll have to dig that out as well. Figure a day or two at best, depending on the damage, just to prepare the area and make it stable for installing the winch. Then they have to haul out the rock that's blocking the shaft. Don't forget that the shaft is probably weak from the tumbling elevator, so they'll have to be careful and make sure the shaft doesn't collapse any further. That will probably slow them down to a top speed of a hundred feet a day." Mack lifted his helmet and wiped beads of nervous sweat from his brow. He took a deep breath, or tried to, but coughed harshly. Swirls of dust danced through the air. He put his helmet back on and continued.

"At best, we're looking at a week down here."

"And at worst?" Sanji asked.

Mack stared down the tunnel, unable to look at anyone's eyes. "At worst, a mile of rock fills the shaft. The whole thing is probably unstable as hell, and they may have to dig a new one. You all know how long that takes. On top of that we have no power, and no hope of getting power. We've got a generator in the Picture Cavern, but only enough fuel to run it for maybe a day.

"The batteries we stored down here will keep our headlamps lit for another three or four days. We were in the process of setting up supplies for just such an event, but were far from completing the stockpile."

"How much food have we got?" O'Doyle asked.

"Well, there's six of us down here," Mack said. It was so quiet in the cavern they could hear each other breathing. "We've got enough food and water to last about three days, if we ration strictly. From then on, we're all on the underground diet plan." His attempt at levity fell on deaf ears.

"What about the KoolSuits?" Sanji asked. "How long will they keep working?"

"I suppose that's the only good news," Mack said. "According to Angus, the suits should work fine for a good three weeks."

"So what would you say our chances are?" Lybrand asked.

Mack looked at Connell, who simply nodded.

"Not good at all, I'm afraid," Mack said softly.

Connell fought against his feelings in the only way he knew, by taking control. He took a deep breath, stood tall and walked to the center of the party. "I know it sounds bad," he said with his best authoritative voice. "But you all need to know there's more."

3:17 a.m.

"What do you mean *there's more?*" Lybrand asked. "We're in a tomb here, Mr. Kirkland, how can there be more?"

All eyes turned to Connell. He'd spent years controlling his emotions, presenting a blank face to everyone at all times. Despite the situation, he showed no signs of fear or panic.

"Before the elevator crashed I talked to Dr. Hayes," Connell said. "It appears that EarthCore may not be the only ones down here." Connell expected words of surprise, but no one spoke.

He continued. "Apparently, she discovered that someone else was in the mountain, digging toward our main shaft. I spoke to her shortly before the crash. She wanted everyone to evacuate the tunnels immediately, so I can only assume that this other faction was getting close to the shaft. We may even be able to assume that they reached the shaft, sabotaged the elevator, and that's why we're in this predicament."

"Well who the fuck is it?" Mack screamed. His enraged voice bounced off the cavern walls, an echo that lingered for a few seconds before fading away.

"I don't know," Connell said. "We've had several other incidents. We suspect that the accident in the lab was sabotage intended to kill Angus and possibly others. On top of that, Jansson may have been murdered, and the people who did it may still be around. At this point it's prudent we assume this other faction wants to kill us."

Sanji spoke up in his singsong accent. "But if they got to the elevator, would they not have to attack the whole camp?" Silence again dominated the conversation. The mood grew darker and more hopeless by the second.

"It's possible, but not likely," Connell said. "They were probably just trying to hit the elevator and didn't suspect that Mrs. Hayes would discover their digging. Hitting an armed camp outright would require not only a task force, but a great deal of preplanning with intent to commit mass murder."

Expressions didn't change. They all knew that if the mystery faction had destroyed the camp, they were as good as dead.

"Well that's just fucking great," Veronica said. "What the hell do we do now?"

They all looked at Connell. Confidence and control replaced his fear. These people needed a leader, and that leader needed to give them purpose, something to focus their attention on so they wouldn't dwell on the dim prospects of rescue. He had just such a purpose—Connell wasn't finished with this mountain. Not by a long shot.

"You're missing the obvious," Connell said. "This mystery enemy dug toward the mine shaft. That takes equipment. And while maybe they could have slipped

someone into our adit, or possibly put a spy in our ranks, there's no way in hell they could have sent mining equipment into our shaft without our seeing it."

Everyone fell silent, but their faces lifted with the first signs of hope. Lybrand was the first to voice the common thought.

"So there's got to be another way in," she said.

Connell nodded. "Exactly. It's the only answer."

"So how do we find it?" Mack asked. "There's miles and miles of caverns down here."

"There's really only one way to go," Connell said. "We have to head for the Dense Mass."

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" Veronica stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at Connell. "We're stuck here, with no possibility of rescue, we've just seen two men *die*, and all you can think about is money? You just take the cake, mister!"

Connell gave her a neutral expression. He wasn't going to give her any fuel to continue the tirade. He waited until the echoes of her outburst faded away into nothingness before he spoke.

"Professor, please listen," Connell said. "This isn't about money. We're *cut off*. It's going to take them days to dig us out, maybe weeks. The Dense Mass is what our enemy is after. They're either there already, or they're heading toward it. Either way, that's the fastest way to find them. We find them, and we find out how they got in."

Veronica eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then nodded. "I guess you've got a point."

"So we know where we're going," O'Doyle said. "I suggest we all get some sleep. Everyone is in pretty bad shape, so we'll rest a few hours before heading out."

"Sleep?" Veronica said. "How the hell am I supposed to sleep at a time like this?"

"These caves are hard to navigate, so we'll have our work cut out for us," O'Doyle said. "If you can't sleep, professor, fine, but at least lie down and relax. We need everyone sharp for the march ahead."

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence, then Sanji found a rock-free area and lay down. The others soon followed suit, all except for O'Doyle, who stood guard.

4:12 a.m.

Kayla moved as silently as a shadow, carefully picking her way through the adit. She saw clearly courtesy of three-pound starlight-sight goggles. Through those lenses, the tunnel walls and floors glowed an eerie green.

She'd expected to see bodies, or at least some sign of a struggle, but there was nothing. She saw no sign of the creatures either, but she still moved carefully, her Galil ARM at the ready. She'd seen those things take out a dozen trained, well-armed men. Kayla had no intention of joining the mutilated ranks of EarthCore employees. Still, she had to assess the situation. When she finally made her pitch to the NSA, she needed complete information, and that required reconnaissance.

She moved down the adit until a pile of fallen rocks blocked her path. Some of the boulders must have weighed ten tons or more. It would take Army engineers at least a week to clear the tunnel. She knew she was close to the elevator shaft,

which meant the shaft was likely filled with fallen rocks as well. Not good. Without a way in, all she could give the NSA was a story and a location. Kayla sighed—that would have to do. She'd simply have to do a better sell-job.

The adit's silence seemed to weigh down on her. She wondered if the people who'd been in the adit had heard anything before the monsters pounced. Maybe they hadn't heard anything at all. Kayla shuddered.

There was nothing more to see, so she quickly moved out of the adit.

6:34 a.m.

Mack busied himself preparing backpacks. It gave him some level of escape from his frustration, but the facts that he'd lost two miners and that some unknown enemy had destroyed his mine were never far from his thoughts. It had been a masterpiece, a flawless work and the pinnacle of his career. Now it was gone.

Even his worst-case scenario was overly optimistic. He'd lied more than a little to the others—he couldn't bear to remove all hope, couldn't tell them the truth, tell them that they were already dead. The shaft's integrity was compromised. Another one would have to be dug to get them out. That meant rescue was at least another month away. They wouldn't last a week, especially not after the lights went out.

On top of that hopelessness, there was the unspoken fear of Jansson's abductors. They were down here somewhere, perhaps waiting for an EarthCore member to wander off on their own, to become separated just as Jansson had. Someone was down here waiting.

Someone.

Or maybe something.

The image of the silvery spider flashed through his mind. "Silverbug," Fritz had called it. Mack gritted his teeth to fight back tears. Fritz had been so young. Mack had forgotten about the silverbug in the hubbub of the elevator crash. Could the spiders have taken the missing man? If they did, how did they take a two-hundred-pound man away so fast?

He and Lybrand had told the others about the silverbugs. The story only added to the doom-and-gloom feeling that filled the caves. Mack shuddered, thinking of the slender silvery legs flashing quickly in the dim light, wrapping around Jansson's hand, his leg, his shoulder, his face. Jansson would have screamed for help, but the tunnels ate sound as readily as they gobbled up light. No one would have heard him.

Mack found himself looking around the cavern in quick, nervous glances. Looking for a flash of silver.

6:49 a.m.

"Listen, it's not his fault we're down here," O'Doyle said. Lybrand listened to him carefully, but she had opinions of her own. They stood far down the tunnel that led into the cave complex, away from the Picture Cavern. The only light came from their headlamps, illuminating each other's faces like pale moons floating in the ether.

She wanted to slip away from the others. Away from Connell, in particular. Based on what she'd seen so far, Lybrand felt strongly that following Connell was akin to courting death.

"If it isn't Kirkland's fault, then whose fault is it?"

"Don't be stupid," O'Doyle said. "It wasn't Connell who sabotaged the elevator and who mucked things up at camp. You know that."

Lybrand looked away, down the tunnel. Her fingers drummed a pattern on the hilt of her H&K. She liked the weapon, and she liked O'Doyle. Other than that, this whole situation was about as tasty as a turd sandwich.

She turned back to look at O'Doyle, admiring the hard lines of his face. She even liked the scar tissue that perched where an ear should be. He still hadn't told her that story. She knew he would, eventually. He'd told her a few stories already, some that were obviously difficult and painful to share. Some of the stories he wasn't supposed to tell, what with the oath of secrecy and all that happy horseshit.

At least she'd found out why he had Argentina's flag tattooed on his arm. In a personal tradition born of youth and foolish, macho pride, O'Doyle adorned his body with the flag of every country where he'd killed someone. She didn't ask why the U.S. government had sent him to Argentina to kill. She had hoped to hear more of his stories, *all* of his stories, when they left the mining camp. Only now it didn't look like they were ever going to leave.

Cheated. That's how she felt. She'd been in love only once, way back in the tenth grade. She and Billy Rasmussen passed notes in history class and cut school to walk the littered streets of Patterson, New Jersey, holding hands and being young. Juvenile love, to be sure, but she still treasured the memories. She'd joined the army at eighteen, shortly after Billy died of a heroin overdose. Twelve years she served with honor and distinction. But those twelve years were loveless. She never found anyone in the service, anyone to love anyway, and all her relationships were cheap and quick. Now, at thirty-two, she thought she'd finally found someone.

Patrick O'Doyle.

The two of them hit it off in the midst of the parched Utah desert. It was something that went mostly unsaid, something that clicked between them right off the bat. O'Doyle's professionalism forbid them from fraternizing out in the open. They'd barely even kissed, only a clumsy peck late at night after the celebration party. Their relationship certainly hadn't burned with passion. Not yet, anyway.

But she knew passion was there. They'd connected almost immediately. It bothered her to know the reason for that connection—they'd both killed people. Up close and personal, where you could smell the fear on their last breath as your knife punched through a heart, as you heard the gurgle of lungs filling with blood. Those moments changed a person forever. She never thought she'd find a man who understood what it was like to carry that feeling around, that memory of watching life seep away from another human being. O'Doyle understood because he carried that same feeling. When she talked to him, she felt complete. For the first time in her life, she felt whole.

"You're right," she said quietly to O'Doyle. "You're right. It's just that... you know... I find you, and now..." her voice trailed off as O'Doyle gently put a finger to

her lips. Her heart ached with the gesture, ached at how such a massive, violent man could be so tender.

"I know," O'Doyle said. "I know exactly what you mean. We're going to get out of here, I swear it to you. But he's still the boss and we've still got a job to do down here. We have to protect these people."

She marveled at his simplicity. The job was over. It was now survival of the fittest. She couldn't believe the depth of his loyalty, his professionalism. She instantly wanted to argue with him, change his mind, but at the same time knew it would be useless.

"He's the boss, and we do what he says, understand?" O'Doyle said quietly, but firmly.

She nodded, her eyes never leaving his. She didn't like it. But for now she'd play the role. She'd do it simply because Patrick asked her to.

7:02 a.m.

Connell hefted the weight of the lethal Heckler & Koch machine gun. He instantly hated it. He'd never fired a gun in his life—a silent mantra repeated in his head, a wish that he wouldn't have to use the weapon.

O'Doyle took the biggest pack, but Connell carried more than his fair share. Mack prepared everything with a master's touch, stuffing all food, batteries, ropes, and climbing gear tightly away into backpacks and supply belts. About the only thing he hadn't found a place for was the small generator. Without that, the portable floodlights were useless. They'd make the rest of the trip—wherever it led—using only the lights of their headlamps.

All told, they had seven weapons: three H&K rifles, two Beretta pistols and two K-Bar knives. The pistols and knives belonged to O'Doyle and Lybrand, so they kept them—they each carried an H&K as well. The number of weapons was the good news, but the amount of ammo was the bad. They had six H&K magazines total, two for each rifle. O'Doyle set all their weapons to single-shot, as automatic would use up their precious ammo supply too quickly. The brief weapons training for Connell, Sanji, Veronica and Mack didn't involve actual firing—O'Doyle refused to waste a single round.

O'Doyle carried Mack's cavern map and took point. Connell walked about twenty paces behind him. Another twenty paces back Mack stayed with Veronica and Sanji, and twenty paces behind them Lybrand brought up the rear. They all had their headlamps on, which announced their presence to anyone further down the tunnel, but there was really no choice—they would either be an easy target or stumble blindly through the dark and dangerous caves.

A little more than six hours after the elevator plummeted to the shaft floor, the party set out down the tunnels. They knew roughly where they were headed, but nothing about what they'd find along the way.

Chapter 23

10:32 a.m.

14,100 feet below the surface

They moved steadily downward through switchbacks and crisscrossing tunnels, sometimes crawling hundreds of feet down ancient rock slides, using the massive boulders like misshapen ladders. Twice they had to break out their two sets of climbing gear to get past particularly dangerous declines. When the tunnels were wide open and the footing sure on some ancient streambed, it felt like they moved quickly; but they wanted to move downward, not horizontally.

The massive expanse of unforgiving stone tunnels and brownish tan caverns soaring high overhead seemed to humble everyone, even Connell. In the midst of such grandeur, speech seemed somehow childish and ineffective. In three and a half hours, they'd moved more than three thousand vertical feet below the Picture Cavern.

O'Doyle halted the party and stopped to examine a puzzling feature on the ground. He called back to Connell, who came forward and stared at what looked like tiny indentations in the powdery cave silt.

"What is that, tracks of some kind?"

O'Doyle nodded. "I saw some a ways back, but I didn't much worry about it. That was stupid of me. I didn't think of Mack's little silver critters until I saw this set. Now that I look around, these tracks are everywhere, and I mean *everywhere*. Look at any patch of dirt you see in here and you'll see these little two-prong indents."

O'Doyle pointed to one of the marks. Connell's headlamp lit it up like a spotlight illuminating a pitch-black stage. The marks looked like someone had pressed a two-prong fork into the dirt. The "prongs" were less than a quarter-inch apart. Like eyes focusing in on ants after seeing the anthill from high above, hundreds of marks suddenly clicked sharply into view. They were everywhere. Thousands of them in just the small area surrounding him and O'Doyle.

"Holy shit," Connell said softly.

"Yeah," O'Doyle said. "I should have seen it sooner."

Connell marveled at the big man's perceptiveness. The tiny prong marks were damn-near invisible even with the light shining directly on them—that O'Doyle spotted it while on the move seemed incomprehensible. Some of the tracks seemed to end at the rough cave wall. Connell's face furrowed in confusion. "Do the damn things go through the wall?"

"No sir, Mr. Kirkland," O'Doyle said patiently, the voice of an underling explaining the obvious to a superior. "Not through, *up*. I think these things can crawl right up the rock. It makes sense, based on Mack's description."

The term *spider* jumped uninvited into Connell's head. And just when he thought things couldn't get any worse. Now not only was he stuck miles deep inside a mountain, soon to be completely in the dark, but there were spiders, too. Big spiders, from what Mack had said, more than a two feet long. Mack had taken to calling them "silverbugs." The thought of being in the utter darkness with those crawling... *things*... made Connell shiver.

"But we haven't seen anything else," Connell said. "We haven't seen one living thing down here. So, if they're spiders, what do they eat?"

Neither man answered. O'Doyle simply shrugged, stood, and continued down the tunnel. Connell watched the big man's light bob up and down along the walls of the cavern, not just on the floor and sides anymore, but the ceiling as well. Connell counted off twenty of O'Doyle's paces and followed, waving back down the tunnel for the rest of the party to continue.

He checked the ceiling every third step, hoping that he wouldn't see a flash of silver.

2:47 p.m.

14,980 feet below the surface

After six hours of walking and climbing and crawling, the party stopped to rest. With their yellow KoolSuits covered in dirt and grime, they looked like exhausted athletes from some futuristic sport.

"Twenty minute break," O'Doyle called out. "Everybody off your feet."

Sanji and Veronica practically collapsed on the silt-covered ground. Connell, Lybrand and O'Doyle gathered around Mack, who knelt on one knee, his headlamp shining on the map.

"How are we doing?" Connell asked.

"Not bad," Mack said. "O'Doyle is moving us along nicely, but it gets more complicated from here on out. The closer we get to the Dense Mass, the more tunnels there are. I think I should be up front."

Connell looked at O'Doyle, who looked at the map one more time, then looked up and nodded. "Mack's probably better at reading that map."

"Fine," Connell said. "Lybrand, anything unusual from the rear?"

She shook her head. "Nothing that I've seen or heard."

Connell looked at the map, trying to make sense of the complicated network of tunnels. There were so many side passages, so many connectors—it would be simple for someone to slip in behind them. He thought of the tiny sliverbug tracks, and how O'Doyle had seen them while on the move and in very poor lighting.

"O'Doyle, I think you should bring up the rear for awhile when we move out. We can't afford to let someone sneak up on us."

"But sir—"

"Just do it, okay?" Connell said with a forced smile. "Lybrand can take point with Mack."

O'Doyle started to say something, then looked at Lybrand. She nodded. O'Doyle cleared his throat. "Yes, sir, that sounds fine."

"Okay," Connell said. "Twenty minutes then we move out. I'll take watch."

3:11 p.m.

"You do know where we're at, don't you?" Lybrand asked. She tried to sound like she was only teasing, but a hint of genuine concern lurked in her voice. She wasn't sure Mack knew what he was doing.

"Of course I know," Mack said. "I'm just trying to figure out the best way for us to go, that's all." He sat on his haunches, clutching the plastic-coated map in a death-grip, his shaking hands making the paper quaver slightly.

They'd stopped at a triple-branch in the tunnels. One branch led off at ninety degrees to the left, another went steeply up and about fifteen degrees to the left, and the last headed gently down at about thirty-five degrees to the right. Mack was obviously trying to orient their position. He'd rotated the map three times so far. It looked upside down, but she reminded herself there was no upside down on a three-dimensional map. He knew what he was doing. He had to know.

She turned away from him and looked down the tunnels, her light probing the passages' dark depths. They all looked the same to her. It seemed logical to take the tunnel heading down, as they were still above the Dense Mass, but they'd taken two up-slopes already en route to another down-slope. The added dimensions made her disoriented so quickly, she didn't know—

click-click, click-click

She stared intensely into the downward slope, her light probing back and forth with the quick, jerky, birdlike movements of her head. She'd heard something. Until that moment there had been no noise except her and Mack's footsteps. Mack sat quietly, still staring at the map, oblivious to the sound.

click-click, click-click, click

Her ears couldn't pick out a direction. The tunnel amplified the small sound until it seemed to pour from every inch of the ragged stone, as if the walls themselves breathed with the noise. Her light bounced violently back and forth across the tunnel floor, looking for the source. Her fingers gripped the knurled handle of the H&K as her thumb quietly slipped off the safety.

click-click-click, click, click-click

The noise sounded random, like halting movement, or like... like little scurrying feet scraping on rock. She remembered the tiny tracks, and she remembered Connell and O'Doyle checking the ceiling every few yards. Her light flashed upward, where it reflected brightly off a moving, silvery sphere only fifteen feet from her face.

Chapter 24

3:17 p.m.

Lybrand's voice was a hiss between clenched teeth. "Mack! Look over here!"

He looked up at Lybrand, then in the direction of her pointed gun and focused stare—up to the ceiling. There, frozen in the glow of the headlamps, only a few feet from Lybrand's head, perched a silverbug.

Instantly he could see where he'd been wrong. It wasn't a spider, or even a bug. It was a machine.

Its spherical body was slightly bigger than a softball. A long, wedge-shaped protrusion jutted forth from one end and pointed toward Lybrand's head. Other chunks and baubles broke up the outline—an impression of the old Russian Sputnik satellite stuck in Mack's mind.

Four long legs—each divided into three eight-inch long segments—stuck out from the ball's equator, one every ninety degrees. The first segment of each leg jutted away from the round body, the second paralleled the ceiling, and the last segment pointed the leg back to touch the roof, almost exactly like an insect's legs. Mack thought it looked like a silvery Daddy Long-Legs, but with only four limbs.

The last segment of each spindly leg was actually two thin pieces, giving the silverbug eight contact points with which to cling to the rock. Mack was too far away to see the little feet, but the way its body hung effortlessly from the cave ceiling he knew strong hooks or claws dotted the end of each one.

The silverbug's body stood rock-still, but some of the sphere-body parts moved with small whirring and buzzing noises. From end to end, the silverbug looked to be about fifteen inches long. With the segmented legs stretched out flat, it might be as long as five feet.

Mack's mind could focus on little more than the silverbug. "What do you want me to do?" he asked in a whisper.

"Go get the others, get O'Doyle,"

"I can't leave you here alone with that thing."

"Do it! We don't know what this is and I'm not letting it out of my sight. Go get the others, now!"

Mack hesitated only a second, then turned and ran back up the tunnel, moving as fast as he could over the rough footing.

3:28 p.m.

"Does anyone read me?" Cho Takachi said into the walkie-talkie. "This is an SOS, is anybody out there?" His monotone voice droned the words repeatedly. He'd lost count of how many times he'd said that phrase or how many times he'd tried each channel. Nothing came in. Nothing at all. It made no sense. The walkie-talkie should have picked up *something*. The nearest town was just over twenty miles away—there had to be radio traffic in the area, yet thick static dominated every channel.

It didn't really matter. He was going to make it to Milford anyway. He'd already covered about three miles, and only needed to go about three more to reach Route 21. His face roared with pain. Passing out face-up for hours in the desert sun had left him with a severe sunburn. His head still throbbed to the point of promising a third round of vomiting. He stumbled now and then, the desert floor seemingly bucking and lurching beneath him. Every time he moved his right arm more than a few inches, searing pain shot up his shoulder. He'd managed to stop the bleeding. Mostly, anyway. The wound still oozed fresh blood. A concussion, a laceration, sunstroke, and he still had to cover three more miles in this heat.

Sooner or later, he kept telling himself, sooner or later someone will come down this road or I'll reach Milford. I will make it.

His head swam with vivid memories of the attack. Twice he'd hallucinated the flashing things coming at him through the shimmering desert heat. Was he a coward for running? Fuck it—he was alive. Everyone else was dead. Anyone with a brain should have run the moment those things came pouring down the mountainside.

He didn't remember shredding his uniform to tie the bandage on his arm, but it was there, and it had done the trick. He must have done it some time during the night, just before passing out again and laying unconscious through the morning, cooking in the Utah sun like a hot dog on a grill.

"Does anyone read?" Cho said again. "This is an SOS, is anybody out there?" The static seemed to drop off suddenly. His heart leapt when a woman's voice answered.

"Yes, I read you, go ahead."

"This is Cho Takachi from the EarthCore mining camp in the northern Wah Wah Mountains. We've been attacked. I'm wounded and need immediate assistance."

"Attacked?" the woman said. "How's the rest of the camp?"

"I believe they're all dead," Cho said. "They're all hacked to pieces."

"Where are you?"

"I'm on a Jeep trail, I think about three miles north of Kiln Springs. I'm moving north, trying to reach Route 21."

"Stay right there, I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Cho stared at his walkie-talkie in joyous relief for a few seconds, then tried signaling her again. "Hello? Bring a first-aid kit if you've got one." He waited for an answer, but heard only that peculiar static again. He keyed several more times, but received no response. He tried the other channels, but the static dominated. He sat down at the edge of the dirt road, and waited.

3:30 p.m.

She'd almost missed him. It amazed her that anybody made it out of the camp alive, but this one was apparently better than the rest. The little fuck. If the COMSEC unit's periodic sweeps hadn't picked off Cho's calls for help, he might have made it to Milford. She had to make sure that didn't happen.

3:31 p.m.

He turned to look at Cori. Faint light shone from the lamps surrounding the driveway. The passenger-side door was smashed in, glass gone but for a few jagged shards, the once-stately Lincoln now a mass of twisted metal, torn leather, and ripped fabric. The other car had smashed the door in so far that Cori was pushed almost to the middle of the seat. Snow blew in through the broken window, melting where it hit blood.

Her eyes were wide with shock and pain. Her beautiful blond hair clung to her face, matted down with glistening red. Flecks of glass hung in her hair like glitter. Blood sheeted her scalp, her cheeks, her chin, falling to stain her white coat.

She looked at him. This time there was no questioning terror, no fear ... at least not for herself.

"Get out, Connell." Something liquid and gurgling masked her smooth voice. She sounded weak, fractured. "You have to get out."

Connell shook his head. He was in the dream, part of it, yet still he knew something had changed.

"I can't get out, I need to stay with you."

"Get out, my love."

He felt rough hands shaking him. The dream fell away.

"Wake up, Mr. Kirkland," O'Doyle said, his hands gripping Connell's shoulders.

"Wha... what is it?" Connell fought to wake up. The fatigue in his body didn't want to relinquish its hold.

"Lybrand's got a silverbug. She's alone with it now."

Connell's eyes suddenly flew open wide and he escaped sleep's grasp. He stood up, ignoring the throbbing from his knee, and grabbed the H&K. Mack was rousting the two doctors.

"Mack's waking the professors, you bring everyone and make it fast," O'Doyle said. "I'm going to Lybrand."

Before Connell could speak, the big man loped down the tunnel, his yellow suit flashing in Connell's headlamp beam. Connell moved over to the professors and Mack. Veronica looked ready to go. Sanji tried to rub the sleep from his exhausted eyes.

Mack's eyes were wide with fear and intensity. He moved with sudden, jerky jolts.

"What happened back there, Mack?"

"We found a silverbug," Mack said, his Aussie accent ripping out at a fast pace. "Only it's not a spider; it's a machine, a robot or something. She told me to come back and get everyone else."

Connell turned to the professors. "You two ready?" Veronica looked scared, but nodded emphatically. Sanji didn't look ready at all, but nodded as well.

"You two stay behind me," Connell said. "Mack, you bring up the rear, keep an eye on the walls and ceiling, and keep a sharp lookout back down the tunnel. Don't let anything get behind us."

Connell followed O'Doyle and moved down the tunnel. The others trailed closely without a word.

3:33 p.m.

Sonny McGuinness scanned through the channels again on his walkie-talkie. Nothing. Nothing but static. That was all he'd heard since leaving the camp, except for that last little exchange between Cho and the mystery woman. She hadn't followed proper rescue procedures at all, so she wasn't a ranger or a state trooper or anyone of note. Probably a hiker or something. If she was out here and knew enough to monitor the emergency channel, then she was no amateur. Especially if she recognized Cho's position so quickly. Not many people knew offhand the location of Kiln Springs.

Sonny felt surprised anyone made it out of the camp—somehow he'd expected Funeral Mountain to be more thorough. He'd been just over two miles away when he heard the gunshots and explosions and alarms echoing through the brisk night air. That's when his curiosity set in.

What had happened back there, anyway? Initially he'd ignored that thought and managed to put another half mile under his feet. But his domineering curiosity wouldn't leave well enough alone. What did Funeral Mountain *do* when it awoke

and killed people? Were Jessup's demons for real? That cave drawing of the primitive sun, which wasn't a sun at all—was *that* what Jessup's demons looked like? Sonny had turned, cursing himself for doing so, and retraced his steps, moving to within a mile of the camp.

At least, within a mile of what was *left* of the camp. His binoculars showed nothing but a few wisps of black smoke, a few chunks of metal sticking out of the sand, and the concrete footing of the diesel tank. The place had been absolutely *leveled*. It was as if Funeral Mountain had come alive and swallowed up the entire camp.

He'd gotten out just in time. Now EarthCore was just one more entry on Funeral Mountain's résumé, to be remembered alongside Jebadaiah Jessup and Samuel J. Anderson.

Sonny moved away from camp for the second time and headed North toward Route 21. It was only a thirty or forty minute walk to reach Cho's position. He hadn't spotted Cho at the camp wreckage, probably because Sonny's flight took him due West toward Milford while Cho apparently moved North toward Route 21. It thrilled Sonny to know Cho was still alive—both because he liked the man, and because Cho could tell him what the hell happened to the EarthCore camp.

Something about Cho's conversation with the mystery woman bothered Sonny. As soon as she'd finished talking, as soon as she'd told Cho she was on her way, that peculiar static had returned. Something wasn't right.

He turned back and looked toward Funeral Mountain, towering tall and proud among the Wah Wah chain. He was only about two miles northwest of Cho's position. If that woman's twenty-minute estimate was right, she'd reach him before Sonny could get close. But she was coming to rescue the man—Sonny wondered why his nagging intuition told him Cho was in danger.

Sonny sighed and started north, toward Kiln Spring.

3:34 p.m.

Connell half-crouched, half-sprinted down the low-ceilinged tunnel, hands gripping his H&K. He came into the fork slightly ahead of Veronica, Sanji, and Mack. Lybrand and O'Doyle had their guns trained on the silverbug. It hung from the ceiling, seemingly frozen; only a wedge-shaped chunk moved, swinging in Connell's direction when he entered the fork. Connell stood there, motionless, staring at the thing that appeared to be staring right back at him. He thought it looked more like modern art than a machine or a bug.

Veronica and Sanji rushed into the fork. Their sudden presence appeared to spook the silverbug. It moved slightly with a jerky, twitching motion, as if preparing to defend itself. Mack came in just behind the professors—apparently he made one too many people for the silverbug's tastes.

Without warning, the silverbug dropped from the ceiling, or maybe jumped, because it was on the ground in the blink of an eye. It landed on its feet; Connell wasn't sure if it had flipped over or merely reversed its legs. It hit the ground and scurried off in a silvery blur of rapid motion, disappearing into the dark tunnel.

They stood quietly for several seconds, not knowing what to think, not knowing what to say. On a collective level, they all knew their situation had suddenly changed, although they didn't know exactly what that meant.

Veronica broke the silence. "What the hell was that thing?" No one answered. "I mean, it looked like a little machine, but the way it *ran*."

Their ears filled with the still, impossible silence of the caves. No one moved, save for darting glances into every dark area, every nook and cranny. Everyone was on the lookout for a flash of silver.

Connell spoke softly. "First of all, has anyone ever seen anything like that before? Anywhere except for the movies?"

"I've seen some of the unmanned NASA explorer technology," Mack said. "It was at a conference on the future of mining. The explorers were similar insect-looking machines, only much bigger. They're designed for unmanned exploration of Mars's mountains, but they don't move like that. The state-of-the-art isn't much faster than a turtle, and when it walks it looks like a machine." Mack didn't have to explain the analogy. The silverbug moved like an animal, like it was *alive*.

"I once enjoyed the opportunity to visit MIT's robot lab," Sanji said. "As far as I know, they have the cutting edge of robot science. I saw Ghengis IV and their other smart robots. Some of them looked like insects, too, but they do not move like what we just saw. Their best robot, named Cassiopeia IX, I think, was built last year. It takes over a minute just to cross a room, and that is probably the most advanced autonomous robot on the planet."

"How fast would you estimate that thing moved, O'Doyle?" Connell asked, wishing Angus was there. Angus could instantly make sense of the marvel they'd just witnessed.

"Best guess would be twenty to twenty-five miles an hour, Mr. Kirkland," O'Doyle said. "It really hauled ass, and it hit that speed almost immediately."

Connell looked at Mack. "Why were there Mars explorer robots at a mining conference?"

"Well, they figured someday we could use robots to mine the deep areas of the Earth, where it's too dangerous for people to go. But it would take very advanced machines. They would have to drill blasting holes, navigate the tunnels, haul out rock, all the things men do now."

"But there was nothing there comparable to what we just saw?"

"No way, mate. Not even close. That's like comparing a stone wheel to a Ferrari."

"Okay, fine, they're revolutionary," Veronica said. "I think we've established that point. So who built the thing? Why is it down here and what are we going to do about it?"

Connell didn't have an answer. The same questions raged through his mind. "We have to be on the lookout for them," he said. "O'Doyle thinks there's a lot of them around. We have to assume they're down here for a purpose. Someone had to put those things here."

"It's got to be the same people that took out Jansson and sabotaged the elevator," Lybrand said. "So we'd better assume they're very dangerous."

"There's something else," O'Doyle said, his eyes flitting across every inch of the cavern. "That thing was *looking* at each of us. The Japs put cameras on cockroaches, for crying out loud. We know the silverbug saw us. So we have to

assume that its owners did, too. Whoever the saboteurs are, they might know we're down here."

Connell nodded. "You're right," he said. "Let's grab the equipment and get going." He looked across his party. They were exhausted, but no one complained about his decision.

They all wanted to move out, and move out fast.

3:58 p.m.

With Meredith Brooks' song *Bitch* blaring from the stereo, Kayla's black Land Rover—doing 110 miles per hour—caught big air as it sailed over a small hill, kicking up a cloud of dust both on takeoff and on impact. The landing jostled her in her seat, but she barely noticed, for when she cleared the hill she finally set eyes on that piece of shit Cho Takachi.

He sat there, devil-may-care, as if he were sunning himself on the side of the road. Her Steyr GB-80, fixed with a silencer, pressed gently into the small of her back, reassuring her with its solid presence. Instinctively, she reached a hand under the seat, double-checking the position of her Galil ARM automatic. This was the wide-open desert, after all, and a girl could never be too careful.

She slowed quickly, bringing the Rover to a coasting halt in front of Cho. She hopped out as Cho shambled slowly to his feet. He looked like shit. Like something you'd scrape off a shoe. His face looked as if it had been boiled, so cooked-lobster orange it must have hurt to blink. A dirty, blood-soaked bandage clung to his shoulder. Kayla relaxed; even if she hadn't reached Cho, he obviously wouldn't have made it much farther. She noted the pearl-handled .45 stuffed into his shoulder holster: she'd have to make this quick.

"Hey there," Kayla said in a friendly tone. "You don't look so good."

"I feel like hell," Cho said with a painful smile. "I sure am glad to see you."

Kayla slipped his arm over her shoulder and helped him toward the passenger door. She looked all around, searching for any sign of humanity. No cars, no people, no nothing.

"Hold on while I open the door," Kayla said.

Cho leaned against the side of the Land Rover, smiling even while he winced in pain.

"You gave me quite a scare," Kayla said.

"Why's that?"

Kayla took a step back and pulled out her Steyr. "Because I thought you were going to blow it for me, you piece of shit."

Cho instantly reached for his gun, but he was too slow.

Kayla pulled the trigger three times, sending all three rounds into Cho's chest. He lurched against the Land Rover, spun once, then fell to the ground, facedown.

She smiled as she put the gun to the back of his head.

Kayla pulled her trigger twice more.

4:01 p.m.

Sonny felt dust on his tongue before he realized his mouth was hanging open. She'd killed him.

Just like that. Just as casual as you please. Pulled out a gun and blew his brains all over the dirt road. It wasn't *fair*. Cho had made it out of camp, escaped whatever it was that had gobbled up everyone else. And she'd just up and killed him.

You're going to pay for that, sister, Sonny thought. *I don't know how, but I'm going to make you pay.*

Who was she and what was she doing out here? Sonny's curiosity flamed at a level just below his rage. He turned away from the scene of Cho's death and started back toward Route 21, a mere three miles away. He could be there in a few hours, then try to flag help, maybe catch a ride to Milford and alert the state police.

On second thought, he decided to stay well off the road. No telling when that psycho bitch would come driving along. He'd cross through the Wah Wah Valley, heading for any one of the dozen mines that dotted the San Francisco Mountains. The San Frans were about eleven miles away—he wouldn't arrive until 2:00 a.m., at the earliest.

Sonny stopped suddenly, the small cloud of dust he kicked up drifting lazily in front of his feet. He knew the site was worth billions. He knew Connell kept the place a secret, but other people—EarthCore people—had to know what was going on. They wouldn't let a treasure-trove like Funeral Mountain slip away. The camp was obliterated—how long would it be before EarthCore sent people out to investigate, to look after their investment?

It hit him that 2:00 a.m. might be too late. If *he* knew EarthCore would send people soon, then so did the woman that killed Cho. That was probably *why* she killed Cho, to keep him from calling for help.

She killed him to buy time.

But buy time for what? She couldn't get much ore out of the mountain before EarthCore people came looking, at least not enough to make it worth killing a man. She couldn't haul ore by herself, and he'd seen no one else at the camp's ruins.

So, if she couldn't haul a fortune from the mine, what could be important enough to kill Cho and any other survivors she might have found? The walkie-talkie continued to crackle with static—he still couldn't call for help. Sonny wouldn't be to the San Francisco Mountains for another ten hours. He couldn't have local cops and the Utah State Police at the site until tomorrow afternoon at the absolute earliest.

She'd be gone by then. Just as he knew Funeral Mountain meant death, he knew she'd be gone. He might never know what she was up to, or what was important enough for her to kill Cho. She'd never be heard from again.

Sonny clenched his fists and snarled at himself. He knew what he had to do. He could keep heading for the San Frans, but sooner or later his mind would get the best of him and he'd head back anyway. Any time spent walking away was wasted time.

He spat his wad of Copenhagen onto the ground, took a swallow from his canteen, put a fresh pinch in his cheek and headed back toward Funeral Mountain.

Chapter 25

6:04 p.m.

15,439 feet below the surface

Mack and Lybrand moved forward, crawling on their bellies most of the time, walking at a half-crouch the rest. Mack's muscles voiced constant complaint. Fatigue was beginning to take its toll—making his concentration slip. He'd need more than just thirty minutes of sleep, and he'd need it soon.

"Do you hear something?" Lybrand called out from behind him.

The words sent an instant chill down Mack's spine. His breath caught in his throat as he listened for the *click-click* of a silverbug. But he didn't hear that. Instead, he heard a low echoing rumble.

"What is that?" Lybrand asked. "Sounds like when you put your ear to a seashell."

"Yeah, it does sound like that," Mack said. But it sounded like something else, something he'd heard before but couldn't place. He pulled the map from his belt and stared at the confusing web of tunnels and caves. Up ahead about 300 yards was a large tunnel, larger than most.

"I think we're almost there," Mack said. "There's a big tunnel up ahead that goes straight to the Dense Mass. We'll be able to walk the rest of the way."

"Well let's get going," Lybrand said. "I never thought I'd be so excited to just stand up and walk."

Mack stuffed the map back into his belt and crawled forward, the back of his mind searching his memories for that mysterious rumbling sound.

6:25 p.m.

Moving as quietly as a piece of dry grass blowing across the desert sands, Sonny crawled to the top of a ridge that gave him a clear view of the camp's ruins. His position also let him keep tabs on the little concealed spot used by Cho's killer. At that moment, she was down in the ruins, poking around the few visible spots of broken wood or twisted metal, unaware that Sonny watched her every move.

Hopefully unaware, Sonny reminded himself. She sees you, and you'll wind up just like Cho.

Sonny watched her move through the ravaged camp. She had a nasty looking machine gun slung across her back, and in her hands she carried a box. Every now and then she'd find something of interest in the sand, place it in the box, then continue on her strange excavation.

It had surprised him how skilled she was at hiding her position. She was no desert newbie. He'd completely missed her warren during his first cautious pass through the area. She knew her business, all right, and she knew it well. Eventually he'd spotted the Land Rover. No amount of camouflage is going to hide a Land Rover, even in the mountains. From there it was a simple matter to track her to her hiding place, although she'd done a remarkable job of covering her trail. Her nest offered her a perfect view of the former camp. She'd been there all along, watching, waiting.

The camp remained as it was when he'd last seen it, obliterated and almost invisible. He couldn't help but think that the mountain had come alive and swallowed the place up. A few pieces of charred wood or blackened metal peeked out from beneath the sand and rock, but only a few.

One smoldering pile pumped thin black smoke into the darkening night, its small, dying flames dancing softly amid glowing embers. Obviously a fresh fire; he hadn't seen it when he'd last left the camp. He peeked through his pocket-sized binoculars. Even under the low magnification, he could make out a blackened skull sitting on top of the pile, grinning amid the flickering flames. She'd brought Cho's body back to camp, cut it up, and burned it. But why? Another mystery added to an already full plate of unaccountable actions.

Whatever she was up to, she would have to make her move soon. Her clock was running out. EarthCore might swarm down on the place at any moment. Sonny had no clue what she was up to, and that lack of knowledge ate at his soul like a cancer.

The mystery woman finished up her scavenging and headed back to her warren. She wore webbing jam-packed with ammo clips and a large handgun in a shoulder holster. Normally Sonny would have admired the long blond hair that gracefully danced in the breeze, and the sway of her hips, but not now. Not after what she'd done. Right now there was only one way he could admire that body.

When it was cold, motionless, and dead.

6:26 p.m.

Kayla lugged the box of equipment toward her nest. She'd tried counting bodies and checking them against the list of personnel she'd made during her observations, but quickly found the task impossible. Buried body parts littered the area, most of them charred and blackened by fire. She had to hand it to the creatures; they were definitely thorough.

Despite the camp destruction, the wreckage yielded a treasure—one of Angus's "Marco" locators, designed to track down anyone lost in the caves. Flames had charred the metallic surface, but it still worked like a champ. She'd spent over two hours tearing through the lab's rubble hoping to find one.

The Marco unit gave her a far more accurate body count than she'd managed on her own. Without the unit, counting skulls was the only way to tally the dead; but most skulls were smashed into pieces and buried fairly deep. She had to hand it to Angus in one category—he did quality work. His little "Polo" transmitters worked just fine, even after the bodies they were attached to burned to cinders.

All told, there were twelve people unaccounted for. Twelve names missing from the mangled corpses buried in the camp's ruins. The list read like a who's who of camp personnel.

Professor Veronica Reeves. Professor Sanji Haak. Bertha Lybrand. Patrick O'Doyle. Mack Hendricks. Sonny McGuinness. Connell Kirkland. Fritz Sherwood. Lashon Jenkins. Brian Jansson.

And, of course, Angus Kool and Randy Wright.

They had to be dead, of course. All of them, except for Angus and Randy, had been in the caves when the monsters attacked. Even if the survivors had somehow avoided the bloodthirsty creatures, they were trapped under miles of rock with no way out. She didn't want to assume anything, but at this point she had to write off Connell and the others.

Cho appeared to be the only one to make it out of the camp. She'd chopped him into little bits with a broken crescent-shaped knife left buried by the attackers, then burned his body. By now he was indistinguishable from the rest of the victims.

But what about Angus and Randy? What about them? They were still in a hospital in Milford ... they might come back at any time. She had to deal with them, and quickly. Just to be sure. She didn't have much time left. Soon Barbara Yakely would send someone to find out why Connell didn't respond. When that happened, the game was up.

She had to contact the NSA soon, before anyone from EarthCore showed, and make sure all camp personnel were dead by the time the NSA arrived. The NSA would flinch at something as simple as killing a few survivors. Kayla knew that from experience. Hard-earned experience, the kind that had cost her a promising NSA career.

It was a race against time. She needed to serve this up gift-wrapped and on a silver platter, with no complications. She had only one chance, and that was to make sure NSA director André Vogel was the one to take this information to the president. Such a coup would give Vogel's political career a turbo-boost. He'd control the discovery, probably be one of the main people reporting to the president even though the on-site work would be handled by the Air Force and staff from Nevada's Area 51.

Kayla went to work on the COMSEC unit. The time had come to make contact and make her pitch, but she couldn't have the NSA picking her location. She'd have to set up several satellite relays for her signal, make it impossible for them to triangulate her position. This location was her only bargaining chip. She meant to keep it secret until they met her singular demand.

And before she made that call, she had to take a quick trip to Milford Valley Memorial Hospital.

6:31 p.m.

15,512 feet below the surface

Connell stood with the others, staring at the violent impasse before them.

"Well, so much for walking in standing up," Lybrand shouted—everyone had to shout to be heard over the river's roar.

"I knew I'd heard that sound," Mack said. "I've seen underground rivers before, but nothing like this."

The party's lights played about the water's dark surface, a 75-foot-wide undulating band of angry onyx. The river ripped through a chasm that had towering vertical walls reaching up at least a hundred feet. The walls showed sandwich lines of various petrified sediments, all in shades of gray or red or tan. Up at the top, where their headlamps cast only a dim illumination, a flat sandstone layer sparkled with pristine white gypsum, a ceiling fitting the grandeur of the limestone chasm and roiling river. About twenty yards downstream, the water roared off jagged rapids, making it impossible to traverse. And downstream was the direction they needed to go.

Connell looked at Mack. "Suggestions?"

"I thought we'd take this all the way to the Dense Mass, but the map didn't say anything about the river," Mack said. "We're going to have to cross, then work the tunnels on the other side."

Connell nodded. O'Doyle walked over and looked at the map with Mack. As the two tried to figure out the next step, Connell looked for a place to sit and rest his knee. The constant crawling over rock had his old car-accident injury screaming with complaint. He sat at the water's edge, his headlamp playing about the shallows.

He knelt with a small wince of pain and dipped his hand beneath the surface. The water looked black and cold, but he could feel the heat even through his KoolSuit gloves.

Connell stared downstream, the direction that would lead them to the Dense Mass. The river curled angrily, dark and hungry, waiting to devour. He walked over to O'Doyle.

"Couldn't we rig something and go down the river?" Connell asked. "I mean, it will take us right to it."

"Don't even think it, Mr. Kirkland," O'Doyle said. "We don't know how deep it is, and look at that current. We've got to cross, it's the only choice."

O'Doyle began stripping out of his KoolSuit. The muscles on his arms twitched with every motion, as did the fat around his waist and stomach. Everyone stared at the plethora of small flag tattoos that covered O'Doyle's back and arms. Connell recognized a handful of them: Brazil, Argentina, France, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Australia, Russia, Columbia, Algeria. The flags lined up in regimented rows and columns, covering his entire back from below his neck down to his waist and even spreading to his upper arms.

"What are you—poster boy for the United Nations?" Veronica said.

O'Doyle laughed. "Something like that, Professor."

"Why are you stripping?" Lybrand asked, concern showing in her eyes.

"Because I won't be able to swim right across." O'Doyle stepped out of the suit, unashamed of his nakedness. He gestured to a frothing wave curling up over a jagged rock-fall at the river's far side. "Look where the current is going. I'll probably smash up on that shoal. It'd be sure to rip the suit, and then even if we did make it across I wouldn't last long in the heat." The KoolSuits kept them all

somewhat oblivious of the scorching temperature of the cave, which now topped just over 200 degrees Fahrenheit.

"Christ," O'Doyle said, a sheen of sweat breaking out over his body. "It's pretty fucking hot down here."

"You don't have to do this, O'Doyle," Connell said.

O'Doyle flashed a reassuring smile. "Sure I do. We have limited supplies, Mr. Kirkland. We can't afford to backtrack."

Connell cupped his gloved hands into the river, then put his face into his hands. The water felt only a little cooler than the air.

"This water is probably 150 degrees," Connell said. "You're not going to last long."

"Then I'll have to get across quick," O'Doyle said.

O'Doyle gesture to Lybrand for some rope. She brought it to him, touching his hand and looking at his face. O'Doyle looked back at her with a quick, confident smile, then looked up at the rest of the party.

"I'm going to tie this around me," he yelled, slipping into his lecturing drill-sergeant voice. He held the rope as if it were a feature of show-and-tell. "If I'm sucked downstream and I don't make it across, you need to reel me in just like a big fish."

He tied the rope tightly around his chest, threw the other end to Connell, then waded gently into the stream. He dropped with each slow step, as if descending a steep staircase, the water splashing up around his body.

Connell quickly lined everyone up on the rope. He stood closest to the water. Sanji took anchor, tying the rope around his girth.

O'Doyle looked at Connell. "You ready?" he asked. Connell nodded. The others stood rock still, eyes wide with trepidation. O'Doyle walked back to the shore. He took a deep breath, then sprinted for the water, his fat bouncing and muscles rippling. He lunged outward with a yell, feet churning the air in classic long-jumper fashion. Headlamps tracked him, his painted body illuminated brightly amidst the lightless chasm. Connell realized that O'Doyle wasn't jumping directly for the far side, but a bit upstream toward a rock that jutted out of the river like a shark's fin breaking the surface just before attack.

O'Doyle hit the water and tumbled forward, arms pumping amidst the swirling eddies. He shot downstream as soon as he splashed in, carried swiftly by the pounding current. O'Doyle tried to turn his body to catch the shark-fin rock, but he could find no purchase to brace himself. The current slammed him into the jagged stone like a bird hitting a window pane. He bounced back a bit, stunned, and rolled off the far side of the rock.

The rope slid around the rock's far side, and snapped taut in an instant, pulling the party unexpectedly toward the water. Veronica lost her footing on the wet silt and hit the ground hard. The rope yanked Sanji forward and he lost his balance, feet sliding on the slimy ground and dropping him on his ass.

The rope pulled Connell into the water, but he didn't let go. The river swirled around his shoulders. Mack splashed directly behind him, the water up to the Aussie's waist. Lybrand grunted and strained. Mack's feet slipped in the slick silt and he fell face-first into the water, splashing madly as he fought against the shallow's insistent current.

Less than four seconds after he'd jumped in, O'Doyle's life lay in the hands of Connell and Lybrand.

The current's pull on O'Doyle's weight continued to yank Connell into the river. The rough rope rapidly slid through his hands. Water swirled around his head, in his mouth, up his nose. Connell planted his feet against an invisible rock and pulled with all his strength, tilting his head back to pull in breaths that seemed to be half air, half water.

The slipping rope tore through his KoolSuit gloves and ripped into the skin of his palms and fingers. Connell screamed in pain, but squeezed harder and yanked—the slipping stopped, and the rope snapped taut once again. He grimaced with effort, refusing to let go, ignoring his burning hands. The river pulled his helmet fell from his head. The current pulled it downstream—it disappeared in an instant.

Behind him he heard Lybrand growl with effort. Primitive instincts screamed at him to let go of the rope, to get back to shore, but he ignored them. He braced his legs and pulled with all his might as his muscles howled in protest. Something in his back popped with a banjo-like twang of pain, but he ignored that as well.

Veronica stood and threw herself on the line, pulling back as hard as she could. Her strength gave Sanji a chance to recover as well; the fat man dug his heels into the dirt with a snarl of fury. He started walking backward, one strong step at a time. Coughing up water, O'Doyle grabbed the rope and began pulling himself hand over hand toward the shark-fin rock.

Connell backed up a step from his platform rock. Mack tried to stand, but again slipped and fell. His helmeted head bounced off a round rock with a splash and a dull *thunk*. He instantly went limp and started to float downstream. Connell left one hand on the rope and desperately reached out with his other, snagging Mack by the collar just as the current started to suck the Aussie toward the river's powerful middle. Mack's helmet stayed glued to his head.

O'Doyle reached the shark-fin rock and crawled atop it. The rope sagged. Connell let go of the rope and used both hands to pull Mack toward the shore. Lybrand rushed in and helped. Together they pulled Mack clear of the water, dropping his limp body on the damp, glistening sand. Ignoring the pain from his back and bleeding hands, Connell again picked up the rope.

O'Doyle managed to perch on top of the shark-fin rock. Water sprayed at his feet. He looked as if he were surfing the rapids. His coiled legs launched him across the stream once again. He splashed in just five feet shy of the far tunnel. He swam toward the far side with long strokes of his powerful arms. Just as he'd predicted, O'Doyle smashed into the shoal at a ferocious speed. So frightening was the impact that Connell thought surely the man would bounce off, sink and drown, but O'Doyle clung tenaciously to the rocks. The ferocious current sprayed water up and around him.

O'Doyle pulled himself along the shoal toward the far side's dark tunnel entrance. He finally pulled himself on the shore.

He secured the rope to the other side and the party crossed the river one at a time. Lybrand took O'Doyle's KoolSuit and crossed first, showing the proper method. Then the professors crossed, one at a time. Mack regained consciousness. He was groggy and weak, but was able to make it across with help from Connell.

As he stepped from the roiling water to the shore, his knee and back throbbing, Connell saw that he wasn't the only one in pain. O'Doyle hadn't put on his KoolSuit gloves—his knuckles looked like cheap hamburger. Both his palms were open and bleeding. The big man walked over to Connell.

"Lybrand told me what you did," O'Doyle said only loud enough for Connell to hear. "Thanks." O'Doyle offered his mangled hand in *friendship* and gratitude.

Connell extended his own hand, noticing that his palm—raw and bloody from the rough rope—spilled red droplets onto the wet rocks. They shook hands, ignoring the other's wounds as well as their own, their blood running together. Connell looked up into the big man's eyes, realizing this was the first time he'd ever shaken O'Doyle's hand. Connell also realized, quite suddenly, that it was the first time in years anyone offered him a hand in friendship, not as some business formality.

Lybrand bandaged their wounds. Connell replaced his torn gloves with the spare pair in his belt. O'Doyle moved the crew farther down the tunnel, until the river's rage faded to a dull roar. They found an alcove resplendent in dull brown flowstone glistening with a sheet of slowly trickling water. O'Doyle lay down and was out instantly. Sleep nabbed them one at a time, all except for Lybrand. Connell nodded off last, watching Lybrand stand over the body of her sleeping man, H&K clutched in her hand. Her eyes flicked attentively up one end of the tunnel and down the other—and at the ceiling.

Always at the ceiling.

Chapter 26

9:01 p.m.

Kayla hated being away from the mountain. Anything could be happening back on that dark peak. She had to make this quick—she still had the 90-minute drive back from Milford to the EarthCore camp.

She got in on the tail end of visiting hours. That was okay, she didn't need long. Milford Valley Memorial Hospital looked clean and well run, despite its small size. Kayla approached the reception desk, behind which sat an overweight nurse with a beehive hairdo and horn-rim glasses. From the look of her she might have been working that job back in the sixties, when she would have been the epitome of fashion.

The woman—her name tag read "Alice"—looked up at Kayla, but didn't smile. "May I help you?" she asked.

"I'm here to see Angus Kool."

The woman's eyes widened slightly, then returned to normal.

"I'm sorry, but we're not allowing any visitors for Mr. Kool."

"Fine. Then let me see Randy Wright."

"He's in the same room," the woman said. Now she smiled, forced and fake and apologetic. "Doctor's orders, you see."

Kayla reached into her purse, fingers tracing along the inside pockets, gracing over multiple IDs.

"I'm agent Harriet McGuire, FBI," Kayla said, flipping open her ID badge. "This is a matter of national security. You will take me to that room immediately."

The beehive woman's face turned ashen. Her eyes widened, and this time they stayed that way. She looked at the badge, then back up at Kayla.

"But... but you can't, ma'am."

"Take me to that room, or you'll spend the night in jail, you got it?"

The woman's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again.

"Right now," Kayla said. "*Move* it, Alice."

Alice hopped out of her chair, grabbed a key from a pegboard, and moved around the desk. Her fat jiggled with each step. The woman smelled like baby powder and potato chips.

"I assure you, Agent McGuire," Alice said as she walked quickly down the hall. "I'm only acting on orders from the doctor."

Alice turned down a left-hand hall, looked back once, then inserted the key into a door marked C-2. Just as she turned the handle, Kayla shoved the woman through the opening door. Kayla reached into her purse and drew her Steyr even before Alice hit the flecked linoleum floor with a "whuff" of surprise.

Kayla strode into the room.

Two beds, both empty.

Angus, you little prick.

Kayla looked at Alice. "When?"

"I... I don't know what you mean."

Kayla knelt and reached in the same motion, her left grabbing a handful of beehive and yanking it back. Alice opened her mouth to scream, but froze when the cold barrel of a gun slid past her teeth and rested against the back of her throat.

"Thought you'd make a little extra money, did you, you fat pig?" Kayla said, her voice the soft hiss of a coiled cobra. "Well now it's time to pay the piper. Talk to me."

Kayla slowly pulled the gun from Alice's mouth. A thin strand of saliva swung from the barrel.

"They were only here for a few hours," Alice said in rapid-fire words. "We admitted them into this room then he told me to shut the door and he offered me ten thousand dollars to play along and told me to go get the doctor and he paid him too and I didn't think I'd get into trouble and—"

"Shut up," Kayla said. "When did they leave?"

"A couple hours after they arrived," Alice said. "He did something to the phone."

Kayla walked to the phone, which sat on a small table. There was no cord in the phone's jack. Kayla rolled the little table out, and found the phone cord. It ran into a small metal-and-plastic contraption no bigger than a toaster.

You little prick. You little fucking prick. You routed the calls.

"So am I in trouble?" Alice asked quietly.

"That depends, Alice. All you have to do is help me." Alice nodded as Kayla wrote down a number on a scratch pad next to the phone. She handed it to Alice.

"If they come back, you call that number."

"That's it?"

Kayla nodded. "That's it."

"But what about..."

"What about the money? Keep it, just call me if they come back."

Alice nodded. She stood and held the scrap of paper with both hands, pressing it to her chest.

Kayla quickly walked out of the room without another word. It was all she could do to keep herself from sprinting to her Land Rover. That little prick Angus was more than she'd bargained for.

9:28 p.m.

The small shovel dug into the stony ground with the sound of metal scraping against unforgiving rock. It took almost five minutes to dig a three-inch hole, barely enough to plant the *Kilroy Was Here* sign. The digger suppressed a giggle, wishing he could see the look on Connell's face when the sign was discovered.

He'd expected more calls from Connell, but had received only the one. Angus had spent enough money to pull this off, first bribing Cho to put on the fake bandages, then bribing a doctor and that fat nurse to seal off his room. From there it was easy. He'd set up a relay on his hospital room's phone, so that calls were automatically routed to his walkie-talkie. Of course, he was so deep in the tunnels he had no way of knowing if Connell had called in the last day or so.

Angus now knew that he wasn't the first in these tunnels. Some of the tunnels weren't even natural—they had been dug into the stone. There was a crushing disappointment of not being the first in the tunnels, but the mystery was still every bit as intriguing. Who had dug these tunnels? And how could they dig them so far beneath the surface? Angus and Randy had found no evidence of blasting, nor a shred of leftover mining equipment. The artificial tunnels looked like they'd been chipped out, like people had taken a hammer and chisel and dug away. That, of course, was impossible. The amount of time it would take to chip out a tunnel of any size—let alone the dozen or so artificial ones they'd seen thus far—would be enormous, and no one could survive that long in this heat.

The answer, they hoped, lay in the enigmatic robots Randy had dubbed "ALs," short for "artificial life-form." The silvery creatures lurked everywhere. The things seemed to be watching, sometimes even *tracking* Angus and Randy. Angus didn't know what to make of their behavior, but he knew there was only one way to see what made such clearly advanced machines tick.

AL tracks dominated this area of the caves, ubiquitous wherever a patch of dry silt covered stone. The tracks were far thicker here than anywhere else they'd seen so far. It was a veritable AL thoroughfare, which made it a perfect place to catch one.

Actually, Randy was ready to do the catching. Angus was bait. They already established that the four-legged robots reacted mostly to movement and noise, and that they kept at least a fifteen-yard cushion. Randy lay half-buried under dirt and rocks, motionless, about twenty yards down the tunnel. They'd rigged a blanket from the ceiling and hoped to use it as a net.

Angus looked at his handheld monitor. It weighed less than a pound, but gave an excellent readout with its four-inch display. The unit picked up data from the tiny, five-ounce motion sensors they'd placed about thirty yards down the tunnel. They had originally brought the motion sensors to keep tabs on EarthCore personnel. Now, however, the motion detectors proved to be invaluable for gathering observational data on the ALs.

The readout showed a scale map of the tunnels covering a one-hundred-yard diameter area. He stood at the center of that large circle. On the screen, a red dot slowly blinked on and off. Angus banged the shovel against the wall three times, letting Randy know that the AL was on its way. They didn't want to use walkie-talkies until they established the ALs' method of communication.

Clearly, the ALs were the most advanced robots he'd ever seen. Angus theorized they wandered in a loosely programmed pattern, probably utilizing some form of fuzzy logic to maneuver through the tunnels and collect data, probably for creating detailed maps that showed the expanse of natural tunnels. Once "full," the creatures likely returned to the surface to pass the info on to their masters.

He watched the red dot. Still blinking slowly on and off, meaning the AL sat still and unmoving. The faster the AL moved, the faster the light blinked. Angus picked up the Kilroy sign and jammed it into the hole, making as much noise as he could.

The light suddenly started flashing faster as the dot moved toward him. He slammed the small shovel against the wall with two quick hits, informing Randy the AL was coming fast. Angus held his breath. The blip moved toward him, then stopped as the light returned to a slow, steady blink.

"Angus, get down here! I got it!"

Angus sprinted down the tunnel with a rush of adrenaline, feeling oddly like some primitive cave dweller deep into the hunt. His headlamp light bobbed madly as he neared Randy and the wiggling blanket.

They'd slashed the blanket in a dozen places, hoping to entangle the AL. The strategy had worked; two of the AL's slim, squirming legs poked through the blanket, which trapped the struggling, gleaming, spherical body. They heard whines and whirs of machinery, but the AL looked very trapped.

Excitement blazed from Randy's cherubic face. "Help me bag him! Watch out for his feet, they could be sharp!"

The two men pounced on the entangled AL, wrapped it further in the blanket, then lifted the whole package and placed it in a backpack.

"Damn thing is heavy," Angus said as they sat down and watched the bag wriggle with the AL's futile escape efforts.

Randy nodded in agreement. "That surprised me. The way they can crawl across the ceiling I guessed them to be made from some kind of aluminum alloy, something light." They both looked at the bag, listening to the whirring sounds emanating from within.

"Well," Randy said. "What do we do now?"

"Oh, come on," Angus said. "You've had a biology class before, haven't you? I think it's time we had ourselves a good old-fashioned dissection."

9:43 p.m.

15,521 feet below the surface

"Professor Reeves, wake up."

The hand on her shoulder shook gently, but insistently. Sleep danced enticingly around her head, calling to her to forget the shaking and slip back into slumber. Ignoring it, however, did not make it go away. She felt the hand's gentle strength squeeze firmly, pressing for her attention.

"Professor, wake up now. We're in danger."

She batted her groggy eyes open, feeling her body's complaint against the lack of sleep, and looked up into Connell's face. He returned her look only for an instant, then his eyes flicked down the tunnel. She immediately noticed the tension in his demeanor. She also noticed that his other hand pointed a machine gun in the direction of his gaze. The gun's barrel reflected the light from his headlamp in a thin, lethal, metallic line.

She sat up slowly, wiping the sleep from her eyes with the backs of her gloved hands. That action made her face burn and tingle with needlelike pains. She had more than a few blisters on her face and head. She hoped they didn't look as bad as the puffy, peeling, painful-looking blisters on Connell's face. The others fared little better. The KoolSuits regulated overall temperature, but the prolonged heat was taking its toll on their exposed skin.

Connell wore Mack's helmet and sat on his haunches. Mack was still asleep. Veronica suspected that Mack had suffered a concussion.

"What is it?" she asked quietly, fear already clawing its way into her mind, filling the void left by fading sleep.

"It's the silverbugs again. This time there're more of them. Their behavior is making O'Doyle nervous."

The thought of that spidery silverbug sent a shiver down her spine. She didn't like the way its spindly legs and dead, metal body could move so fast, so fluidly, with the grace of a ballet dancer. She grabbed her helmet, flicked the light on, placed it on her head and looked down the tunnel at whatever held Connell's rapt attention.

What she saw almost made her scream.

A line of silverbugs stretched down the tunnel's rocky floor, one gleaming body after another, spaced about ten feet apart. They stretched as far as her light carried, extending back toward the river. She counted at least forty in her line of sight. But it wasn't the number that chilled her blood as much as their actions.

The silverbugs bobbed in rhythm; a sickening, snap-motion of the body jerking toward the ground and then instantly popping back up. The line bobbed in unison, each silverbug moving neither forward nor back, just snapping up and down in an *unnatural* way that made her fight-or-flight response flare like wind-fueled fire through drought-ravaged grassland.

"What the hell are they doing?" she asked, unconsciously moving a step behind Connell.

"I don't know, but we're not sticking around to find out. You help Sanji with Mack, so I can keep my gun ready. Lybrand and I need to keep our hands free in case we have to start shooting."

Veronica's eyes never left the sickening line of convulsing machines. Sanji awoke almost instantly. Mack took more effort. The Aussie's eyes were glassy and

unfocussed. Sanji dragged Mack to his feet. Veronica slipped under Mack's left arm, Sanji under his right; they kept him on his unsteady feet. Their KoolSuits brushed together with rubbery squeaking noises.

She saw Lybrand standing at the back end of the tunnel, less than twenty feet from the nearest silverbug, her gun leveled at the jerking creature. Connell and O'Doyle stood behind her, conferring over the map, eyes flicking up from the tattered paper every other second to watch the strange machines.

Veronica watched Connell fold the map, stuff it in his belt and run toward her. O'Doyle stood next to Lybrand, the two of them facing down the tunnel.

"We're moving out," Connell said, a tinge of fear tracing his voice. "We're going to go forward a hundred yards and then take a tunnel to the right. It's a steep vertical climb, but at the end it takes a sharp descent and moves us toward the Dense Mass."

"What about the silverbugs?"

"O'Doyle doesn't want them following us, giving away our location," Connell said. He moved down the tunnel, gun pointed ahead of him, his light showing the way like a beacon in the night. She and Sanji followed as fast as they could under Mack's heavy weight.

9:48 p.m.

O'Doyle stared at the bobbing line of silverbugs that stretched far down the tunnel's length. The machines' clicks and whirs played off the rough stone walls, filling the tunnel with an echoing din.

"You ready?" he asked Lybrand.

"Yep," she said. He wanted to look at her, even for a second, but couldn't. His training forced him to concentrate fully on the danger before him. He reminded himself she wasn't a woman now, wasn't someone he loved. She was a soldier, ready to do her job.

"Use your sidearm," he said, pulling his Beretta and slinging his H&K with one smooth motion. "Stay low, keep your hand on my hip so I know where you are. Look back if you have to see where we're going. I won't take my eyes off them unless we have to run, so you have to let me know what's coming behind us. Once the firing starts, we won't be able to hear anything. Pat me on the left hip to go left, the right hip to go right. Watch my actions as often as possible—if I turn to run, you'd better be three steps ahead of me and booking it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Patrick," Lybrand said, her voice cold and professional.

O'Doyle took a deep breath to steady himself. "Okay—let's see what happens."

He leveled his Beretta at the first silverbug and fired. The bullet ripped through the sphere with a spark and a pop. A smell like burning chocolate instantly filled the cave. The silverbug fell to the ground, two of its legs curling in while the other two twitched violently in random directions.

O'Doyle fired again less than a second after the first blast, but the swarm was already in full motion, scattering like enraged ants. The shot blew a leg off the second silverbug. The machine whirled and tried to run, but Lybrand's bullet hit it dead center. It fell to the floor, motionless and smoldering.

The rest of the silverbugs sprinted down the tunnel, their legs a madly flashing blur of faceted reflections. O'Doyle fired three more times, all misses. Just like that, the silverbugs were gone.

The sound of gunfire died out. O'Doyle quickly checked to see if he'd been hit by stray ricochets. He hadn't felt anything, but he'd seen stranger things during his combat days. Free of blood, he checked Lybrand.

"You all right?"

"Fine," Lybrand said. She moved forward in a crouch toward the first fallen silverbug, its leg still madly twitching in a revolting mockery of a dying insect. O'Doyle grabbed her arm, stopping her.

"Don't go near it. We don't know if it's booby-trapped. Let's get the hell out of here." Lybrand moved through the tunnel, her hand on O'Doyle's hip as he kept his light and his gun pointed back the way they had come.

Far away, at the edge of his light, he saw a silverbug lurking. Still moving backward, he waited for a clear shot.

9:53 p.m.

Sonny McGuinness sat quietly, hidden among the rocks less than twenty-five yards from the killer's warren. She'd been gone for three hours, leaving in the direction of Milford and coming back the same way. He watched as her Land Rover drove right through the camp's remains and ground its way up the hill toward her burrow. She wasn't bothering with caution anymore. Something had changed.

The Land Rover skidded to a halt less than fifteen yards from her formerly invisible hiding spot. She got out and strode into the warren, her every move an exhibit of anger.

Adrenaline buzzed through his brain, making him feel shaky and alive. Alive. Something he wouldn't be for long if he stayed here. If he could just get a little bit of information, something the cops could use to track her down, then he could take off. He'd given up any fantasy of killing her himself. He couldn't take that psycho bitch. But he'd come this far, and now he was only a short crawl from her position.

He needed to get closer still. He had to know.

Sonny quietly moved toward her nest.

9:56 p.m.

That little fucking prick Angus Kool had thrown a major monkey wrench into her plans, but he wasn't going to stop her. No way, no how. He was out here somewhere. Why else would he have set up the hospital ruse? Was he looking for a way into the tunnels, or was he in there already? Perhaps he'd sneaked back in through the adit, possibly when Kayla was sleeping. If that was the case, then he was likely dead along with the others. But she had no way of knowing for sure.

Kayla punched numbers into the Harris COMSEC unit, carefully creating a web of bounced signals and coded relays. As far as the NSA was concerned, her call would originate from a payphone in Duluth. The NSA had expert SIGINT people,

but she knew a dozen tricks they had yet to learn. The ruse would only last about ten minutes, tops, but she didn't plan to be on that long.

She knew she didn't have much time. The camp's secrecy kept people from calling in—only Barbara Yakely had done so, and then only in response to one of Connell's queries. But Yakely wasn't stupid. After a day, perhaps just a bit more, Barbara would try and contact Connell. When she couldn't do so, she'd send someone out here to investigate, and when that happened, Kayla's play was over.

She hoped she could finish everything off in about ten hours. Ten hours to regain the only thing she'd ever wanted—to be an NSA agent once more. Controlling her excitement lest she make even a minor mistake, Kayla silently entered the codes into the Harris COMSEC unit. Another hour or so of programming, and she could make the call.

10:47 p.m.

Veronica had thought herself in shape, and in reality she knew she was, but carrying most of Mack's weight on her shoulder—up a steep incline all the way—wore her out within twenty minutes. Connell took her place, giving her the map, then shouldering Mack with one arm while keeping his H&K at the ready with the other. Connell seemed tireless, dauntless, unstoppable. She was amazed that—amid all the horror of the caves and the silverbugs and some unknown, murderous enemy—she felt a pang of attraction for him.

Strange thoughts to have at a time like this, Professor, she chided herself. *Not exactly the place or time for a Love Connection.*

Every few minutes she heard a gunshot erupt from far back down the tunnel, where O'Doyle and Lybrand brought up the rear. She didn't know if they were in danger. As long as the gunshots kept ringing out, she surmised they were still in good shape.

She busied herself with the map, calling out directions. The map looked strangely familiar to her, as did the tunnels. They were very much like the Cerro Chaltel catacombs. She felt instantly at ease with the map, finding she could read it without difficulty. She led them steadily in the direction of the Dense Mass. At each turn, she paused to make an arrow out of loose rock to point the way for Lybrand and O'Doyle.

They turned a sharp corner dominated by a pendulous green stalactite. She directed Connell down a shaft on her right-hand side, then knelt to gather loose rocks to make a pointer. Connell and Sanji shuffled up the slope, practically dragging Mack. Their noise quickly faded away. She scooped small rocks into a pile.

Then something caught her eye.

She snapped her head up, fear gripping her, realizing that she was alone in the cave with no weapon should the silverbugs come. She saw nothing. She looked hard, her light flashing across the darkness, filling the cave with a faint cone of light. No movement, no flashes—nothing.

No sooner had she bent her head toward the rocks than her eye again picked up the mysterious vision. Suddenly it hit her; she reached up and snapped off her headlamp, then looked down the tunnel.

There it was, far down the tunnel, faint but unmistakable.

A light.

A light so weak it only presented itself in complete darkness, but it was there. It looked very small. She noted the tunnel narrowed gradually to only a few feet of clearance, which cut off most of the light source.

She screamed down the tunnel to her right. "Connell! Get back here now!"

Another gunshot from far behind filled the tunnel with noise. O'Doyle and Lybrand were drawing closer. Veronica crouched with her headlamp off, staring at the light. Connell's headlamp beam danced on her and the wall to her left as he ran toward her, then he was there, crouching beside her.

"Where's Sanji?" she asked, grabbing his arm.

"He's back down the tunnel with Mack. What's wrong? Why is your light off?"

In answer, she gently reached up and turned his lamp off, then pushed the side of his face to make him look down the tunnel.

"Holy shit... what's up there, according to the map?"

Veronica pulled out the paper, switched on her light and examined it. "It looks like a huge, kidney-shaped cavern. It's very big, but the map says the cavern's floor is far below our current elevation. Looks like this tunnel might lead to a cliff on the edge of that cavern."

"Is there a way down to the cavern floor?"

"I don't know. It's hard to tell on the map."

Connell stared at the faint glow. "If there's a light, someone is there. We may have found our silverbug owners."

10:51 p.m.

"I can't believe the whole thing is made out of platinum," Randy said. "This is so cool."

Angus nodded in agreement. A pair of tiny portable halogen lamps flooded the tunnel with light. The AL lay on a flat rock, its spindly legs sticking motionless into the air. Angus thought it looked very much like a dead bug. They'd found access panels all over the AL, easily opened by small catches built right into the body.

"I wish we hadn't smashed it up so bad," Randy said, looking at the one mangled leg and the heavily dented left side of the spherical body. "We damaged the internal structure."

"Yeah, but what choice did we have?" With no suitable equipment on hand, they'd decided to use the most primitive of research techniques—smash the thing with a big rock until it stopped moving.

For the past hour they'd poked through the machine's innards. The level of technology stunned them. The legs were all hollow, thin straws of the same tough platinum alloy that made up the shell. Long strands of a fibrous black material were anchored at multiple points inside the hollow tubes. The material appeared to be some kind of artificial muscle, although the strength-to-weight ratio must have been very high to make the heavy ALs move so quickly. The first two sections of every limb were identical, each about a quarter-inch in diameter and eight inches long. The last section was actually two thinner tubes, about an eighth of an inch in diameter and, again, eight inches long. Those two tubes—they'd dubbed

them “split feet”—ended with a cluster of tiny retractable hooks or claws that were too small to do any damage, but perfect for gripping any type of rough surface.

The shell itself, about seven inches in diameter, was packed full of fascinating items. The black muscle material coated the inside of the shell, obviously providing locomotion for various external gadgets whose purpose remained a mystery. Angus and Randy didn't understand even half of what they saw. Angus figured that a large blue chunk of glassine material probably served as some kind of a battery. Randy thought he identified an irregular, faceted crystalline lump as the CPU, the AL's computer brain, but it was only a guess—the structure differed from anything they'd ever seen.

About the only things they *could* identify were a pair of tiny pneumatic pistons mounted behind the wedge-shaped head, and a simple radio transmitter and receiver. Four thin coils of wire, possibly tiny retractable tentacles, curled up inside the wedge. They were still guessing at their purpose.

Randy's wide eyes seemed to suck in every detail of the technological miracle. “You really think it's a genuine AL and not some kind of probe?”

“It seems so,” Angus said. “The radio transmitter and receiver are both fixed on a single frequency. That's not going to travel very far down here in the tunnels, so I don't think they're remote-controlled.”

“They must use the frequency to communicate with each other,” Randy said. Angus nodded. Logic dictated the numerous ALs communicated somehow; it wouldn't make sense for a bunch of them to blindly wander around, covering the same ground over and over again.

“Still think you can scramble their signal?” Randy asked.

“I think so. If we fix our walkie-talkies to that frequency and transmit static, it should screw them up pretty bad.”

“It's odd that they use simple radio frequencies, don't you think?” Randy said. “I mean, look at all this advanced technology. This thing is vastly ahead of anything I've ever seen.”

“Yes, but look at it in a broader light,” Angus said. “The AL is very advanced, but it's also all very *simple*, and therefore very easy to maintain. As long as someone isn't trying to jam it, simple radio is very reliable at short range. And the leg joints; see how each joint mechanism is identical, no matter where it is on the body? That means they only have to make one part—easy to build, easy to replace and easy to keep in stock. These tunnels hold more square mileage than all of New York City. Think of how much space that is to explore. These things may have to last several months in order to get to a deep area and return to its launching point. Whoever built them needed something simple and reliable. Hey, something just dawned on me—there's no wiring in here. How does it work with no wiring?”

“I think that's the platinum,” Randy said. “See how all the artificial muscles are affixed to the shell's interior? The platinum carries the signals from the main processor and apparently each muscle sorts the commands. The signals go all over the shell, but specific muscles only react to specific commands.”

“Yes, that must be it,” Angus said. “Platinum's conductivity makes it perfect. And the fact that it doesn't corrode and isn't affected by any temperature changes you'd find down here helps, too.”

Randy shook his head in amazement. "This is pure genius. No wires to corrode or break, no fuses to short out—it just sends all signals through the shell. Even if the AL shell breaks or something punches a hole through it, it can still send signals to any part of the body. Incredible."

"Boy-oh-boy is Connell going to be pissed when he sees this," Angus said gleefully. "There must be twenty *pounds* of platinum in this critter."

"Who the hell could afford to make such a thing? At \$850 an ounce, it would cost around \$270,000 just for the shell material, let alone construction and other components."

Angus looked thoughtfully at the dead AL, his mind collecting the available information, sorting it, cataloging it. There was far more going on down here than he had ever suspected. "No one can afford that much for a simple exploratory device, not to mention there's not enough platinum around to merit this kind of a machine. At least, not up there," he added, jerking his thumb toward the surface.

"You think someone is already mining the Dense Mass?"

"They must be. No one is going to make machines like this out of platinum unless they've got tons of it. The Dense Mass is at the center of the entire tunnel complex. So the people who made these ALs must have found the Dense Mass and already mined it, or at least a portion of it."

"But how could EarthCore not have known that?"

"Hey, I'm sure there are people out there better at subversive tactics than Mr. Big Shit Connell Kirkland. He got fucked, that's all. Somebody did a number down here."

"That doesn't make sense," Randy said. "If they already made it to the Dense Mass and mined the platinum—which we think they *had* to do to build the ALs—then why would they build them?"

They both fell silent for a moment, contemplating a situation that seemed to make no logical sense.

"I don't know," Angus said. His mind searched for possibilities. "Maybe—"

A soft beeping from the motion-tracker's monitor interrupted their thoughts. Randy picked it up off the ground—one look at the screen made him freeze up with tension.

"What is it?" Angus asked.

"I think you'd better figure out how to jam those radio signals," Randy said quietly, handing the monitor to Angus.

At least twenty red blips slowly pulsed on the screen.

10:56 p.m.

O'Doyle cursed under his breath. He didn't know how many shattered silverbug bodies he'd left in his wake, but the damn things kept popping up all over the place. He was down to his last Beretta magazine, and only five shots remained. The silverbugs had quickly learned his effective range and stayed beyond it, far enough that he missed most of the time, but still close enough to reflect the light from his headlamp. They scurried across the tunnel floor and up the walls, moving away from the light as it flashed back and forth. The collective noise of their whirs and their feet clicking on rock filled the tunnel with an eerie,

constant chatter. It sounded like a million wind-up toys packed into a small steel box.

The silverbugs increased their distance even more when Lybrand started shooting—her aim proved to be far more accurate than his. He felt a surge of pride each time she pulled the trigger and another silverbug erupted with a shower of sparks and that sickening smell of burning chocolate. If they ever got out of this, they'd make a killing betting on her aim at biker bars and gun conventions.

Suddenly and without warning, the silverbugs scurried away. His light flashed back and forth across the tunnel but saw nothing; no flashes of silver, no squiggling legs... nothing. The horrible click-buzz noise vanished as well.

"Where'd they go?" Lybrand asked, her hand still firmly on his back.

"I don't know. Maybe they had enough."

"Damn good thing," Lybrand said. "I'm down to two shots. Why didn't they attack?"

"I have no idea. There were at least a hundred of those things. They could have easily overrun us."

"Maybe they don't attack at all."

An hour ago he would have thought the idea stupid, but now he wasn't sure. "But if they don't attack, then who killed Jansson?"

She didn't answer. They remained still for a few moments, until Connell's hissed whisper called out to them.

"O'Doyle! O'Doyle, are you there?"

O'Doyle turned toward Connell's voice, seeing the dance of his headlamp along the rough tunnel wall. He moved toward Connell. Lybrand followed. They reached him in seconds.

"Are you two all right?" Connell asked.

"Yes sir, Mr. Kirkland, we're fine," O'Doyle said.

"We found a light."

"A light?" O'Doyle was unable to hide his excitement—a light meant people. "What do you mean? What is it?"

"I don't know. It's down the tunnel. I came to get you two before we investigate."

O'Doyle nodded his approval. "Very good, Mr. Kirkland. The silverbugs appear to have given up the chase for now, so let's move before they come back." O'Doyle ran quickly down the tunnel, Connell followed, and Lybrand brought up the rear, constantly checking behind her.

They turned at the green stalactite and almost tripped over Mack, who crouched groggily on one knee. Veronica and Sanji stood motionless in front of him. Connell immediately saw the reason for their stillness.

It sat there between them and the light, glowing a soft yellow.

A tentacle god.

Chapter 27

10:59 p.m.

Even though they'd never seen one—and to this moment not one of them thought the tentacle gods existed anywhere but in the violent religion of a dead culture—they all thought it looked rather small. It stood about three feet tall, its skin glowing yellow, a soft light emanating from the creature and illuminating the walls with dim incandescent radiance. Below the glow they could make out a pattern of stripes and spots on the rough skin.

Three thick tentacles acted as legs, supporting the thick body with tripod-like efficiency. Three more softly waving tentacles jutted out from the body's midline, alternating in position so that each tentacle was directly above the space between the tentacle "legs." The limbs moved like agile, boneless pythons, muscle rippling under the glowing skin.

Each of the top three limbs ended with three slender tips. The tips fit together so seamlessly that, when closed, the tentacle appeared to end in one thick point. It opened and closed these tips in random fashion, which vaguely reminded Connell of someone opening and closing a fist.

Beneath the glow, Connell noticed black spots peppering the fibrous, muscular skin. Thousands of them, spread all over each tentacle and throughout the ball-shaped body, like small, polished onyx jewels embedded in the strange flesh.

The tentacle god reeked of a distinct, offensive smell—the pungent punch of dog shit and the sickeningly sweet waft of rotting fruit: perhaps apples or strawberries.

Connell felt stunned, as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. Nothing in his experience could have prepared him for this moment. He stared at the creature for several minutes, incapable of speech. The others acted no different.

The tentacle god, just stood there, tentacles waving softly.

O'Doyle finally ended the mental standoff, raising his Beretta and pointing it at the tentacle god. Connell suddenly broke his paralysis and, grabbing O'Doyle's arm, pushed the gun away from the creature.

"Don't shoot it! We don't know what it is."

O'Doyle stared back at his boss with a cold, heartless gaze. "We know exactly what it is," he said. "We all saw those carvings in the Picture Cavern. We know what these things do to people."

Connell felt a chill brace his body, despite the KoolSuit's constant comfort, as the havoc-laden images ran through his head. He looked back at the tentacle god, still glowing an inviting yellow. For some reason the small, graceful creature, which couldn't have weighed more than sixty pounds, didn't look capable of carving up a human.

"What do you think, Veronica?" Connell asked quietly, eyes fixed on the creature.

Before she could answer, their headlamps caught movement far up the tunnel wall, almost to the ceiling. A pair of white tentacles slid out of a crack no more than six inches wide, accompanied by a hissing sound of dead leaves blowing over concrete. Everyone inadvertently took a step back. O'Doyle's gun came back up and pointed at the new creature; Connell laid a hand on O'Doyle's arm, but didn't try to sway the big man's aim. No one even breathed.

The creature slid out of the crack like pudding pushed through a strainer, its body swelling as it left the confines of stone until it reached the same size as the first tentacle god. The new one didn't glow yellow, didn't glow at all, and they could

clearly make out the pattern of black-and-gray spots and stripes on white skin. The second creature gracefully lowered itself to the ground and moved to stand a few feet in front of the first. Two of the new creature's tentacles hung like beached seaweed: shriveled, limp, and black.

"Oh my God," Veronica said quietly, shrinking back against Connell as a third creature slid from the crack in the wall. This one moved quickly to the original creature—which still glowed a soft yellow—and pulled it back down the tunnel. Connell observed that the first creature didn't move gracefully and smoothly like the two that had poured from the wall. The first creature moved clumsily, haltingly, as if it were about to fall on its face at any second.

"They look kind of like an octopus," Mack murmured from his delirium, looking up at the creatures from his spot on the ground. "Rock octopuses."

The creature with the two blackened, limp tentacles stood before them. Connell saw some of the onyx spots shrink back into the body, only to pop up again. The spots alternated this action—there were hundreds of them, some shrinking back while others stayed visible, like twinkling stars in a clear night sky.

After a few seconds of looking, the creature thrust one tentacle into the air. O'Doyle pulled back the hammer on his Beretta. Lybrand did the same.

Its raised tentacle suddenly pulsed three times with a bright light, the pulses starting at the body, moving up to the end, then disappearing, a *whump whump whump* of yellow. The creature lowered its tentacle back down. It stood motionless. The other two creatures stood about ten feet farther down the tunnel toward the unknown light. Neither of them moved.

No one spoke for several moments. The cave filled with a surreal stillness until Lybrand finally broke the silence.

"What the fuck is it doing?"

"It looks like it's waiting," Sanji said.

"Waiting for what?" Lybrand asked. As if in reply, the creature again thrust its tentacle into the air, let off a *whump whump whump* of yellow light, then lowered the limb. This time it added a quick, high-pitched *screech*, as if to punctuate the light show. Everyone jumped slightly at the unexpected noise. It reminded Connell of a basketball shoe squeaking on a gym floor.

"Let's just shoot this fucking thing and be done with it," O'Doyle growled. "This must be what killed Jansson."

"Rock octopus," Mack said, sounding groggy and delirious. "Rocktopi. Anybody got any aspirin?"

"Don't shoot it!" Sanji said. "I think it's trying to communicate with us." He slowly lowered his helmet and turned off the light. He raised his arm and laid the headlamp against his bicep, pointing it toward the ceiling. He then quickly turned it on and off three times, the light brightly illuminating his KoolSuit. With a shock, Connell suddenly realized the creature's flashing yellow was exactly the same shade as their KoolSuits.

The creature reacted quickly to Sanji's message, waving its good tentacle and spinning in an impossibly fluid, graceful circle, as if dancing, its whole body flashing bright yellow. Sanji stepped forward from the group, repeating the tentacle god's motion as best he could. No one said a word, just simply stared at the unfathomable scene.

The creature cavorted through a series of antics: it rushed up the side of the wall, amorphous body conforming to the wall's shape; it shot its good tentacle like a pseudopod and clung to the eight-foot ceiling; it pulsed with bright blues and greens to accompany the original yellow. The other two creatures remained down the hall, one frolicking along with Sanji. The other, the first creature they'd seen, wobbled from side to side, moving slowly, tentacles waving. The motion reminded Connell of something, something strangely human and familiar, but he couldn't tell what it was.

Sanji mimicked the lead tentacle god as best he could, already growing short of breath from the unexpected exertion. Lybrand leaned her head forward, as if moving a foot closer would give her some insight.

"I don't think that's language," she said. "It's *playing*, like a child."

A flicker of movement caught their eye, high up on the wall, in the crack that had spawned the second two tentacle gods. Another tentacle slid through, but this one was bigger. Much bigger. Only the tip fit through the crack, the three-fingered end splitting and feeling around the inside edges of the tunnel like a trio of searching snakes.

Sanji's dance partner pulsed a bright purple, then ran up the wall and started tugging on one of the "fingers," hanging and swinging from it as if it were a jungle vine.

"Veronica," Connell said quietly. "What's on the other side of that wall?"

She held the map with shaking hands. "It looks like that wall is fairly thin, and there's another tunnel on the other side."

A deafening screech filled the tunnel, much louder and deeper than that made by the small tentacle god. It sounded as if a semi had locked up its brakes and skidded across an open highway. Everyone jumped at the horrid sound; the cacophonous bellowing seemed to shake the very ground.

The six humans stood stock-still. The thick, gray-and-black spotted tentacle finally found purchase on the smaller creature and pulled it quickly, but gently, into the crack. The crippled tentacle god squished into the crack like a purple dollop of goo, entering the wall as its boneless body conformed to the narrow, rocky crevice.

"Is there a connecting tunnel between this one and that one?" O'Doyle asked. His voice sounded urgent, aggressive yet full of dread.

"I don't see one," Veronica said. Her eyes constantly flashed from the map back up to the wall.

The big, mottled tentacle again lolled through the crack, the three boneless fingers waving like the snake-hair of Medusa. Connell couldn't see the body through the narrow crack, and wasn't sure if he wanted to.

As the large tentacle-fingers waved about, the two small tentacle gods moved toward it. The first creature they'd seen moved slowly and in an unsure manner, guided by the other, which was graceful and quick. Both pulsed a warm purple, although the original's light looked fainter and thinner.

It was the uncoordinated walk that brought Connell's impressions into focus. *Dimwitted*, he thought, staring at the slowly moving original tentacle god. *It's retarded or something.*

"I don't like the looks of this," O'Doyle said. "It seems like the adult is pulling the children away from danger."

The python-like tentacle first pulled the dimwitted creature through, then popped back out and grabbed the other. Neither creature fought, and in an instant they were gone, pulled through the crack like jiggling Jell-O.

"Did you see that fucking tentacle?" Lybrand said in a rushed voice. "It was huge. That thing must be ten feet tall."

Connell tried to imagine one of the three-foot tall creatures growing to monstrous size, but the picture wouldn't register in his brain.

"They have no bones," Sanji said. "They go right through the wall, they have no bones."

The crack seemed like a mouth smiling at an inside joke to which Connell wasn't privy.

A repetitive *click click click* sound filled the narrow tunnel. Five headlamps snapped rigidly to attention, pointing back down the tunnel like a sweep of Broadway spots swinging toward center stage. As a group, they peeked around the green stalactite corner.

Brightly reflecting the headlamps sat a string of jerking silverbugs, convulsing in rhythm, snapping toward the ground with sickly speed and then slowly rising back up, only to snap down again. Lights played up the length of the tunnel—silverbugs stretched as far as the headlamp light traveled.

The lights didn't reveal just the silverbugs, but something else as well, something unrecognizable. All eyes tried to focus at the back of the tunnel, at the far end of the light's long but weak reach. The back of the tunnel seemed to *move*, to *flow*, to *convulse*.

O'Doyle hurriedly holstered his Beretta and in a flash whipped his H&K into firing position, bracing his legs as if to fight the impact of an oncoming train.

"Run!" he screamed over the clamoring silverbug sounds. "Get to the light, right now!"

Connell and the others paused for only a moment, for the briefest fraction of a second, until their eyes focused on the horror that swept down the tunnel like a wall of bile. They turned and sprinted for the light.

Chapter 28

11:04 p.m.

Randy Wright felt very much like a worm on a hook.

"Nothing. Keep scanning," he shouted up the tunnel. He walked slowly, fear visible on his body as if his KoolSuit were woven from the emotion. He didn't like the way the ALs tracked his movements, adjusting themselves to keep their wedge-shaped protrusions pointed in his direction as he walked back and forth through the stone passage.

"It's probably a low frequency," Angus said called back. "Better to travel through the tunnels that way." He was still in the small cavern, where they had dissected

the silverbug, tinkering with the radio and trying to find a way to scramble the machines' signals.

"I don't really care about theory right now," Randy said. "Just find it." The ALs tracked his every step. While one AL fascinated him, more than twenty clinging to the walls and the ceiling sent a primitive survival urge tickling through his loins.

Suddenly the ALs' behavior changed. Randy felt his skin bubble up with goosebumps as the machines rushed to form a straight line on the tunnel floor. They started to bob in a coordinated, herky-jerk fashion. Something about the movement looked insectlike... predatory. Randy fought a sudden urge to run.

"Angus, you'd better get that figured out quick. They're up to something and I don't like it."

Then, just as suddenly as they'd started bobbing, the ALs broke ranks and moved randomly, walking in circles and bumping into each other.

Randy screamed back up the tunnel to Angus. "That's it! That's screwing them up royally!"

"I knew it," Angus shouted back. "Get over here."

Randy ran up the tunnel to where Angus sat with the dissected AL. A sharp crackling, hissing sound filled the air. Angus's walkie-talkie looked as if someone had smashed it, leaving wires exposed and circuit boards scattered about the sandy ground.

"Frequency is at 300 kilohertz," Angus said smiling. "I just rigged the radio to broadcast rapidly alternating blasts of static and coding from our scrambling signal. It should really mess up their communication. What are they doing?"

"They're wandering all over, bumping into each other. They look drunk."

"You see?" Angus said. "They *are* artificial life forms! They use communication with each other to help navigate, like a moving network. They act like a communal life form, like an insect hive."

Randy stared at the electronic mess that was once a walkie-talkie. "We can't exactly carry that pile of junk around with us."

"Of course not," Angus said. "I had to fiddle a bit to find out what signal would be best. Give me yours and I'll modify it."

"Will we still be able to send and receive after you modify it?" Randy asked.

"No, I have to hard-wire the scrambler to the circuit board," Angus said. "The signal has to stay on, we can't switch back and forth."

"Then what the heck happens if we need the radio?"

Angus looked irritated. "Would you rather have ALs following us around?"

Randy handed over his walkie-talkie. Better to be incommunicado than to see that sickening AL conga line again. The silvery machines continued to wander about aimlessly.

"What do we do now?" Randy asked.

"Well, let's turn this off and stay very still and see what happens," Angus said. Almost as soon as he switched off the modified radio, the ALs moved swiftly out of sight down the tunnel.

"Look at the map and see where they're going."

Angus tapped keys on the tiny monitor and his 3-D map flared to full-color life. The map's quality and detail still amazed Randy—it made EarthCore's "official" map look paltry by comparison. The computerized version could spin and rotate

three-dimensionally to show any heading. Angus hadn't wanted to give Connell this version of the map because it clearly showed tunnels, depth and direction. It made traversing the complex easy, much easier than it would be for the mining team. Angus had rationalized, and Randy had agreed, that to stay out of sight and keep one step ahead of Connell they needed a big edge. The map provided that edge.

Angus tapped a few buttons, allowing the screen to encompass a larger view of the map. The flashing red dots blinked at the edge and then were gone, out of range of the motion sensors, but not before Randy noted their direction.

"They're heading for that big kidney-shaped cavern, about 350 yards from here," Randy said. "That's the biggest cavern in the complex, except for the one surrounding the Dense Mass."

"Let's go check it out. We're getting a thumper update in fifteen minutes. We'll have to stop for that, but we could be at the big cavern before the update."

Angus switched on the sliverbug scrambler. He and Randy headed for the big cavern, the modified radio squeaking static all the way.

11:14 p.m.

15,506 feet below the surface

Connell never had time to consider himself cowardly. He ignored the flaring pain in his back and knee and helped Sanji lift Mack off the ground. They tossed the semidelirious Aussie over Sanji's shoulder like a roll of wet shag carpet. Connell held the H&K tightly, shuffling backwards up the tunnel, following Veronica and the lumbering Sanji toward the unknown light.

O'Doyle let loose on full automatic, filling the tunnel with the weapon's explosive report. Pain-filled screams riddled the air, not the screams of humans, but the impossible rubber-on-asphalt screeching of the *things*. Connell never heard such noises before, not even in nightmares, but knew without question they were cries of agony. He suffered an urge to jam his fingers into his ears to block the soul-numbing sound, but he kept both hands locked on the H&K with sweaty, white-knuckled intensity.

The strange light rapidly grew brighter as he sprinted forward, while at the same time the cavern narrowed like a funnel as the ceiling lowered past five feet high. He heard more automatic fire and more screeching, but didn't bother to look back. He cared only about getting away. He scrambled forward, hunched over as the jagged ceiling dropped below four feet. The light spread and brightened, looking suspiciously like afternoon sunbeams crawling across the floor of a shaded room. He found himself wishing, passionately *praying*, that it was indeed sunshine, even though he knew that was an impossibility.

The ceiling continued to slant down, forcing Veronica to her hands and knees. Sanji soon fell to his belly. He set Mack down and urged him to crawl forward.

Connell looked back down the tunnel—he could see the staccato shadows of Lybrand and O'Doyle, briefly illuminated in each roaring burst of gunfire. Connell turned his attention back toward the light, crawling forward, following Sanji and Veronica and Mack through the funnel's small opening.

Once through, the tunnel opened up again with a good seven feet of clearance. Up ahead the light source seemed to reveal itself; the tunnel ended in ... sky? No, it couldn't be sky. The gunfire barked behind him, drawing closer with each burst.

Mack lay on the ground just inside the funnel opening, holding his head and moaning softly. About twenty feet ahead, Veronica and Sanji suddenly stopped short of the tunnel's end. Connell quickly caught up to the professors—and stared out at an impossibility. A cavern the size of a massive domed stadium sprawled before them, lit up as brightly as if the sun itself had squeezed through the narrow caves and taken up residence. The light held a strange blue tinge that seemed to cast a dull pallor on everything. Connell looked to the cavern's ceiling, but had to shield his eyes against the brightness—it was so bright he couldn't stare at it; it might as well have been the sun. Instead, he looked outward and took in a cavern floor filled with strange, clumpy orange trees and endless regimented rows of multicolored plants. A glistening river meandered through the fields.

Farmland.

Connell looked downward. A feeling of absolute doom swept over him. He gently pushed past Veronica and Sanji, who numbly stood by, their bodies radiating an aura of defeat.

Connell walked forward until his booted toes hung over the cliff's sharp edge. He leaned forward enough to look down the jagged, vertical stone face—at least a two-hundred-foot drop loomed between him and the distant cavern floor.

Gunfire erupted close behind him, breaking his funk and forcing his attention back to danger pouring down the tunnel.

"Sanji, drag Mack to the edge," Connell said as he ran back to the funnel and looked through the narrow opening. He saw Lybrand crawl about ten feet past a crouching O'Doyle, who fired short bursts down the tunnel. She rolled to her back and fired down the length of her body toward the flashing, onrushing mass as O'Doyle scrambled past her and worked his big body through the narrow opening. He turned and poured gunfire down the tunnel toward the nightmare, covering Lybrand as she also squirmed through. She cleared the opening, giving Connell a clear view down the passage.

He couldn't count all the rocktopi; the narrow tunnel allowed only a few at a time. How many didn't really matter—every time one fell, another spilled over the top of the fallen creature, tentacles waving, body glowing in angry oranges and bloodreds. They filled the tunnel, pushing forward like brackish water rushing up a rusted pipe. Their pungent dog-shit aroma clung to Connell's nostrils, combining with the harsh richness of gunpowder. The angry tentacle gods' crescent-shaped knives glinted with evil flashes, reflecting the headlamps' glow. Their rough skin scraped against the rock with the raspy sound of a million paper-dry leaves.

Grunting and panting, O'Doyle stood as Lybrand fired another volley into the onrushing rocktopi, now only twenty yards away. He looked up at Connell, who clicked the safety off his weapon, but kept it pointed to the ground.

O'Doyle looked at him as if he were stupid. "What the fuck are you doing? Run!"

"There's nowhere to run, this ends in a cliff!"

"Well then get the gear out and scale down it, goddammit, we're out of time!" O'Doyle squeezed off a burst as Lybrand popped a fresh magazine into her weapon.

"We'd never make it," Connell said. "The cliff is huge!" He dropped to one knee and raised his gun. Held the stock firmly to his shoulder and looked down the barrel with one eye as O'Doyle had instructed him. The rocktopi pressed closer, *filling* the narrowing funnel. They were less than fifteen yards away and moving fast. Connell squeezed the trigger; the kick of the gun and the noise of the shot shocked him, catching him off guard. He fell back a bit, then caught his balance, leaned forward and fired several times. The weapon responded, hurtling burning lead down the tunnel toward the pulsing rocktopi.

Something gray flashed in his cone of light—a rock smashed into the ground in front of him. It bounced past, kicking up a small cloud of fine dust. Connell fired twice more and saw one of the rocktopi fall, tentacles flailing in a seemingly painful death. He didn't have time to enjoy his little victory—another creature swarmed over the fallen body and continued the charge. A hand tapped him on the shoulder. As if he'd been told what to do, Connell turned and ran for the cliff while Lybrand fired until her weapon clicked on empty.

Connell didn't have far to go before he and O'Doyle stood only feet from Sanji, Veronica, Mack and the cliff's edge. O'Doyle moved quickly forward and looked over the edge of the cliff. He turned with a grave expression on his face.

"Lybrand, give Sanji your Beretta," O'Doyle said as he handed Veronica his own sidearm, then took a step toward the funnel. He knelt in front of them, raising his weapon to his shoulder and pointing it toward the sickening mass of pulsating rocktopi that rushed up the narrow funnel like demons being birthed from Hell's womb. "Kirkland, give Lybrand your extra ammo."

Connell handed Lybrand the magazine, then knelt next to O'Doyle. Lybrand stood tall behind Connell and O'Doyle, weapon at the ready. The first rocktopi pushed through the funnel, stood tall on tripod tentacles, and strode forward as the second and third horrors oozed forth like toothpaste squeezed from a much-used tube. These were different from the young tentacle gods—these were thick and strong, agile and aggressive, wielding wicked curved blades instead of dancing with playful innocence.

They had only seconds to live, yet O'Doyle calmly barked definitive orders.

"Kirkland, switch to automatic, but use short bursts. Reeves and Haak, use your weapon only if they close on us, and don't fire until you can put the gun right up to the body. We only get one chance at this, people!"

"Fire!"

The glowing creatures had closed to ten yards when three Heckler & Koch HK416s on full automatic ripped the tunnel air and pounded bullets into their muscular, boneless bodies. Warm streamers of thick fluid squirted like gooey rain, splattering Connell's face as he squeezed off volley after volley. In the deafening, close confines of the tunnel, the rocktopi attack disintegrated under the concentrated fire of Lybrand, O'Doyle, and Connell.

Suddenly and without warning, the charge became a retreat. The remaining rocktopi poured back into the funnel, moving with terrifying speed on their thick tentacle legs, squishing through the opening not as individuals, but as a bulging mass of flashing flesh. Just like that, the attack ceased.

Dead, wounded, and dying rocktopi littered the sandy ground, spurting thick, oily, purple fluid in all directions. Some lay still, some shuddered as if caught in a

freezing wind, still others reached their long tentacles toward the funnel, pulling themselves slowly forward inch by agonizing inch. Even in an unknown creature, Connell recognized the obvious struggles of wounded desperately grasping for escape.

O'Doyle stood, switched his weapon back to single-shot and silently handed it to Sanji. The big soldier took his Beretta back from Veronica and drew his K-Bar knife. O'Doyle wiped thick streamers of goo from his face and flung the mess to the ground.

His eyes bore the remorseless look of a cold-blooded killer. He looked back at Lybrand. "You ready?"

She slung her weapon, grabbed her Beretta back from Sanji and drew her own knife. Together the two warriors stepped past Connell. He remained kneeling, body taut and rigid, hands clutching his H&K as if he intended to hold the weapon tight for all eternity.

Lybrand looked at O'Doyle and nodded. Connell watched in detached amazement as the pair stepped forward and began hacking into the still-moving rocktopi. Strong, overhanded thrusts dug the blades deep into mottled white bodies, bodies that now shone only with the faintest of light. Again and again Lybrand and O'Doyle raised the knives, blades still dripping with the life juices of the last victim, and brought them down fast and hard into another soft body. Tentacles spasmed horrifically with each thrust. A thick smell, like that of rotting meat, filled the cave and the cliff.

Sanji lost his lunch with a guttural sound. Crippled rocktopi squirmed weakly, trying to get back to the tunnel mouth, searching for escape. Death squeals, like a million sets of fingernails on a million chalkboards, filled the cavern, making Connell wince with pity despite their inhuman source.

Within thirty seconds the two soldiers had finished the nasty business and walked back to the others. Weariness, mental and physical, slammed into Connell like a swinging hammer. He fell to his ass and stared blindly off into space, a thin string of viscous purple fluid dripping from his face onto his chest.

Chapter 29

11:18 p.m.

For two scientific minds accustomed to the controlled environments of a lab or the dangers of well-planned thrill-seeking, this was almost too much to handle. Perhaps for the first time since their respective childhoods, Randy Wright and Angus Kool didn't know what to think. They perched, well hidden, at the end of their tunnel, looking out into a sight that warped their notions of reality.

"What the fuck are those?" whispered a wide-eyed Angus, who rigidly crouched behind a boulder. "How did all this get here? And did you hear gunfire?"

Randy also hid behind the boulder. "I'm not sure, it sounded faint. It *might* have been shooting."

They stared out into a massive, kidney-shaped cavern, taken aback by its breadth and complexity. The walls arched high overhead until they met at the center, but the zenith couldn't be seen due to the blazing light that illuminated the cavern with a strange, bluish hue. The cavern stretched away so far they couldn't make out details at the far end. Acre upon acre of never-before-seen plants grew in orderly rows on the cavern floor. Near the cavern's center squatted a small village of dilapidated stone buildings, crumbling like the ruins of some ancient Aztec temple.

Far more captivating than the cavern, the crops, or the buildings were the apparent "villagers." Randy and Angus started in jaw-hanging amazement at the creatures' soft bodies and long, flowing tentacles. They pulsed with patterns of colored light. Their movements looked odd and yet graceful, almost fluid—like a jellyfish coursing effortlessly through deep ocean waters. Some towered a good ten feet from top to tentacle toes. Others were only a few feet high and stumbled around like uncoordinated one-year-olds struggling to walk for the first time.

The creatures moved softly about the cavern, occasionally piping up with a screech reminiscent of a diamond saw slicing through a core sample. The ceiling's blue light cast tiny reflections off thousands of spherical AL bodies—the robots littered the ground and walls. At a distance they looked very much like countless flashing ants scurrying about their hill. Hundreds of tunnel entrances pockmarked the arcing walls; most entrances rested at ground level but some sat as high as two or three hundred feet.

"What the fuck is this place?" Angus whispered.

Randy didn't answer. He stared out at the gargantuan cavern's honeycombed walls, his mind frantically trying to put the pieces together. According to the map, this place was one of the biggest spaces in the complex, second only to the cavern surrounding the Dense Mass. He hadn't known what he'd find, but impossibly strange creatures and echoing reports of gunfire wasn't what he'd expected, to say the least.

"Angus, Check your Marco/Polo unit. That gunfire had to be from EarthCore personnel."

Angus pulled the small unit from his belt and slid to the sandy ground, his back against the boulder, completely out of sight from anyone—or anything—inside the cavern. The Marco-unit beeped softly with a low-pitched sound, then again with six high-pitched beeps. His eyes narrowed with anger.

"Dammit," Angus said. "I can't believe it."

"What? Who is it?"

"I'm picking up signals from Mack, Dr. Reeves, Dr. Haak, Lybrand, O'Doyle, and Mr. Big Shit Connell Kirkland himself," Angus said. "What the hell is going on?"

"We heard gunfire, so something must be very wrong," Randy said. "Where are they?"

"About two hundred feet up the side at ten o'clock if you face the little village."

"How's everyone's vitals?"

Angus tweaked the knobs, switching quickly through readings for each person. "Everyone's pulse is absolutely racing, except for O'Doyle, he looks normal. Temperature is okay, alpha waves are through the roof, but they appear to be

coming down. Hold on... Mack doesn't look good at all. His Alpha waves are down and his blood pressure is low. I'd guess he needs a doctor and soon."

"High Alphas and fast pulse; sounds like they were in a fight."

Angus looked up at Randy. As if the same thought simultaneously flashed through their minds, they slowly peeked over the boulder and into the cavern. Although almost four hundred yards away, they saw hundreds of ALs forming a long, distinct line. One end of the line ended inside the village. The line's other end stretched off into a tunnel entrance at the cavern's edge. Speck-small at this distance, the ALs' reflections flashed in a rhythmic, repetitive pattern.

Randy pulled his pocket binoculars from his belt and stared at the scene. "The ALs are doing that jerking thing we saw earlier. I wish I knew what the hell that meant."

As if to answer his question, a mass of orange-flashing bodies and angrily waving tentacles emerged from the crumbling stone buildings. Moving quickly, the aggressive-looking creatures followed the bobbing AL line. Halfway to the cavern's edge, they stopped.

He focused in, staring at the metal objects clutched in the creature's tentacles. He felt a spike of fear drill through his chest—the metal objects were long, curved knives.

He looked to the right. His stomach churned with revulsion at the sight; a swarm of ALs, perhaps a thousand strong, moved across the ground like a pile of living, squirming, twitching metal balls. Like an army of cartoon ants pilfering a picnic basket, they carried what looked to be sheets of steel. The ALs delivered their strange cargo to the glowing, waving creatures, which quickly formed orderly lines and moved toward the cavern's edge.

"We need to get the fuck out of here and back to the surface," Angus said. "And I mean pronto."

Randy nodded his head in zombie-like fashion, clinging to Angus's words. Angus would get them out. Angus ate danger for lunch. Angus would know what to do.

"It's 11:21," Angus said. "The thumper should be updating. We can send out a message."

Angus handed Randy the Marco unit and pulled out his hand-held computer. "Okay. We've got five minutes until the thumpers turn off," he said. "I'll tell the thumpers to stay on for the next six hours and broadcast a constant SOS."

"Which one?"

"Well, I didn't happen to program a message for Hostile Tentacle-Creatures, but situation number fourteen seems to be the best. Situation fourteen is that we've encountered armed and dangerous claim jumpers. That will get the authorities out here on the double. The surface should be crawling with SWAT teams and Utah State Troopers inside thirty minutes."

Randy busied himself setting up the portable thumper used to send the message to the surface units. He wondered just what the State Police could do about a race of aggressive subterranean creatures.

Angus pulled the small receiver unit from his belt, pushed the collapsible stand into a crack in the rock, then plugged the whole unit into his handheld computer. A blank bar appeared on the screen. He watched the bar fill up, indicating the

receiver unit's progress in processing seismic information sent from the thumpers up on the surface.

Randy finished setting up the small, portable thumper and set it to broadcast situation number fourteen. The unit's small hammer pounded into the ground with a rapid, complex dance. The two scientists winced with every thud. Randy knew it only sounded loud because he was right on top of it, but thoughts of AL hordes and knife-wielding creatures hung foremost in their minds. After only a few seconds, the thumper fell quiet. Randy quickly broke it down and stashed it back in his pack.

Randy paused, an idea filtering through his jumbled emotions. He grabbed the handheld monitor from Angus and called up the tunnel map, studying it carefully. An orange dot marked the position of the other EarthCore personnel.

"That tunnel the glowing creatures went into. It's part of a series that may lead to Connell and the others. The creatures might be going after them. We have to do something." Randy looked at Angus, hoping he would know the best way to help the others.

"Screw that," Angus said in a hiss. "We need to hightail it out of here. Let them fend for themselves!"

Randy stared at his friend. He knew Angus was selfish and self-centered, sure, but this was too much. There were people in danger, lives at stake, for goodness sake.

"Come on, Angus," Randy said, not sure if his friend was serious. "We can't leave them to die. We'll be as careful as we can, but we have to go after them."

Angus's face clouded with anger. The look took Randy aback. For the first time, he felt afraid of his friend, felt like something dark and dangerous lurked inside Angus's talented brain. Randy waited as Angus seemed to turn the situation over in his mind.

"All right," Angus said finally. "We'll go after them and help if we can, but if we can't then we take care of Numero Uno and get the fuck out of Dodge, understand?"

Randy nodded. They quietly finished packing up and slid back into the tunnel, using the map to find an alternate route to Connell and the others.

11:19 p.m.

On the surface, the thumpers' sensitive seismic sensors picked up the tiny repetitive throbbing from below. All six of the thumpers processed the message, read the instructions contained within, and accessed their data banks for the proper action.

As a unit, they beamed a synch signal to cue up their efforts, and began broadcasting the preprogrammed Situation Report No. 14 on all radio frequencies.

11:23 p.m.

After three rings, a groggy-voiced André Vogel answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"André, did I wake you?"

"Who the hell is this?"

"Come on, you don't recognize my voice?"

There was a brief pause. Kayla smiled maliciously, trying to picture the look on his face.

"Kayla Meyers. I don't believe it. Using restricted access codes is a federal offense, Meyers."

Kayla's anger bubbled just from the sound of his voice, but she stayed calm. "I know that," she said. "I've got a matter of national importance, so please, hear me out. I only need two minutes." Kayla paused, waiting for André to make his decision.

André Vogel came up through the ranks of the NSA, starting out as a computer analyst, eventually moving into the field and finally earning the powerful role of NSA director. Vogel answered to only one person: the Secretary of Defense.

"You've got a lot of balls calling me, Meyers," Vogel said. "But then you always did have balls. Since this is the only chance you're going to get, go ahead."

"I've found something that will make your career."

"And that is?"

"I'm afraid it's not that easy, André," Kayla said, trying hard to keep her tone respectful. "There are conditions."

"Well, give me an idea of what this wondrous piece of information is and we'll haggle over a price," Vogel said. "I can't believe you wouldn't go through normal freelance channels on this."

"It's not about the Middle East or any of that penny-ante bullshit. This is the biggest thing you've ever heard of."

"And what's this going to cost me? Your usual price?"

"It's different now," Kayla said smoothly. "This is big, beyond anything we've seen before. This time it's more than money."

"Oh, sounds like something juicy. Get to the point, Meyers, you're wasting my time. What's your damn price?"

"The price is, I want back in."

"Back in what?"

Kayla looked at the handset as if it were stupid. She put the handset back to her ear and took a deep breath, internally counting to ten. "I want my life back. I want to be reinstated to the NSA."

Vogel's laugh sounded loud, harsh and sharp; the laugh of the in-crowd ridiculing an outsider. "You've got to be kidding me! You're a psycho. I *saw* what you did to those children, remember? You're lucky I got them to let you go instead of doing away with you permanently. The NSA will *never* let you back in. I don't care if you have blackmail pictures of the President buggering a sheep."

Kayla fought back her rising anger. "Hear me out. I've discovered a new species."

Vogel made no comment for a few seconds, then said, "A new species of what?"

"I don't know," Kayla said. "It's something no one has ever seen before. This species is intelligent, as smart as man, and very dangerous."

"You're shitting me. You've found another intelligent species? What, like a monkey or something?"

"No, nothing like that. It's completely different. I told you, as smart as man. No one has ever seen anything like it. It's dangerous, definitely a threat to national security and the lives of Americans. It's the Holy Grail for you, André, something you can take straight to the Secretary of Defense and the President himself."

Another brief pause. "Tell me more, Kayla." She heard a difference in his voice. The dismissive, insulting tone had vanished, replaced by the tone of a man hungry for power.

"No," Kayla said. "Nothing more. You know damn well I wouldn't come to you with this unless it was the real deal. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," Vogel said. "Yes, I believe you."

"Good. I'm telling you this is the find you've always wanted. And to get it, to be the man who brings it to the president, I need a full reinstatement. You wipe my record clean. I want it on paper, and I want it ironclad. Once I have that, and I've put copies in the right places in case you go back on your word or in case anything unfortunate happens to me, I'll give you all the location and all the information I have."

"You show me one of your new species and you've got a deal."

Kayla started to speak, then stopped, the words dying on her tongue. André wanted proof. But the adit and the elevator shaft were sealed up with millions of pounds of rock. She'd already checked the camp's ruins, and found no trace of the creatures.

The COMSEC unit's soft beep drew her attention. It had just completed its periodic frequency sweep and isolated a clear transmission signal. She stared blankly at the unit, checking the readout and not believing what she saw.

"Well?" Vogel said. "What's the matter, Kayla? You can't get me proof?"

"I'll get you your evidence, but we're running out of time. You get those reinstatement papers drawn up and be ready to move when and where I tell you."

"Kayla, you have—"

She broke the connection, roughly throwing the handset down and pouncing on the COMSEC unit like a predator. She checked the readout.

"Angus, you little *prick*," she whispered in a voice thick with malice and murder. "You dirty, little motherfuckers."

She rummaged through her gear bag and found the portable SIGINT unit. She picked up the H&K and stomped off toward the camp's ruins, a scowl emblazoned on her hateful face.

11:29 p.m.

15,506 feet below the surface

O'Doyle allowed himself a brief rest and pondered their tactical situation. It wasn't good. He'd taken a look over the cliff's edge and found Connell's assessment correct; it would take an experienced climber forty minutes to descend that face. Inexperienced climbers could probably make the trip much faster, but be a bit worse for the wear after they hit the ground at terminal velocity. Dr. Reeves had climbing experience and said she could take the cliff face with ease. Dr. Haak also had experience, but hadn't done any climbing in twenty years.

O'Doyle looked up as Mack walked toward him, moving slowly like a rickety, fragile old man. "How you feeling, Mack?"

"It's not so bad. The look on his face clearly showed the lie. 'I'm ... I'm sorry about what happened at the river.'"

"Don't sweat it. We all made it across and that's what counts."

"Still, I feel like I let everyone down. I know I'm not in good shape right now, but what can I do to help?"

O'Doyle thought for a moment. He didn't want to give Mack any serious responsibility, and he sure as hell wasn't going to give him a firearm, not in his condition. He could barely walk on his own. "It would help if you went over and kept watch down the tunnel. We can't afford to let anything sneak up on us."

The Aussie nodded gently. "Sure thing, mate." He walked—slowly—to the funnel.

Mack was in no condition to climb. He'd have to be lowered down, and they didn't have that much rope. Mack wasn't the only one having trouble. O'Doyle looked at Connell, who sat slumped against the wall. Back in camp, O'Doyle would have never guessed his boss to be so damn tough. Connell had stood tall and fired away at the rocktopi despite a complete lack of training or combat experience. Judging from the way Connell walked, his knee hurt pretty bad and he'd probably slipped a disk or pulled some back muscles. O'Doyle knew the last injury came during the river crossing; without Connell's effort, O'Doyle would have been swept down stream and drowned.

On top of adversity posed by the cliff, O'Doyle didn't like the cave mouth in which they now sat. It provided an excellent position against the rocktopi's forward assault, conveniently funneling them into one tight ball to be mowed down by concentrated fire. But by the same token, it trapped O'Doyle and the others at one end with nowhere to run should the creatures attack again. And there were cracks in the walls. Big cracks. Too small for a person to fit, but maybe big enough for a boneless adult rocktopi to squeeze through.

Last on the hit parade of fun facts was their ammo situation. Connell was completely out. O'Doyle was shocked when he checked Connell's ammo and found a single bullet in his H&K. Lybrand had ten rounds left in hers. They had eight rounds between the two Berettas. They'd never stop another rocktopi assault—if the flashing creatures came again, it would end in hand-to-hand combat.

O'Doyle stood, slowly and stiffly. He ignored his physical pain and walked toward the professors, who were in the process of examining a dead rocktopi. They crouched over the mutilated carcass. Sanji had cut into the creature with O'Doyle's knife, then peeled the hide back. Rocks weighed down the thick skin, exposing the rocktopi's multicolored guts.

O'Doyle leaned over the body. He'd seen countless combat wounds in his day, and one way or another had seen every human organ either hanging from a dead body or laying on the ground, but he'd seen nothing like this. The guts were thick and stringy, punctuated by colored lumps still wet with the thick purple blood.

He tapped Sanji's shoulder. "Find anything interesting?"

Sanji's wide eyes never left the rocktopi corpse, but Veronica looked up to answer the question. Fatigue pulled at her face. Thick globs of goo covered her hands and forearms.

"I don't know what good this will do," she said. She sounded beaten, both mentally and physically. He didn't think Mack would survive much longer, and he wondered if Veronica would be the next weak link.

"Every little bit helps," he said softly. "We need to know as much as we can."

Veronica sighed and looked over at Sanji. He was oblivious to anything but the rocktopi's innards, sifting through slime and unknown body parts.

She lifted a chunk of rocktopi hide and tossed it to O'Doyle. He stared at the ragged cube of flesh. It felt thick and firm, yet pliant, like a chunk of relaxed elastic. It stretched easily, with all the resistance of a rubber band. The outer skin appeared to be comprised of many tightly packed fibers.

"They have no bones, as we guessed," Veronica said. "Their structure is apparently supported by this cartilage-like skin. Sanji figures internal hydraulic pressure helps as well. Look at their bodies now that we've either shot them or stabbed them—they all look flat, deflated. This skin gives them the rigidity they need to stand and move, yet allows them to be pliable enough to squeeze through tiny cracks like we saw the young ones do earlier."

O'Doyle noticed a thin film on the skin, slightly sticky to the touch.

"What's this slimy stuff?"

"I think they are already decomposing," Sanji said. "Perhaps it happens very fast for them, I don't know. That could explain how we didn't find any remains of them in the old burial site, or at Cerro Chaltel. I think they decompose so fast there's no chance for mummification of any kind that would preserve the flesh."

O'Doyle tossed the chunk of rocktopi skin to the ground. "What about internally? Is there anything there?"

"We have identified a stomach," Sanji said. "It is full of some fibrous plant material. Via the stomach, I believe I found the equivalent of intestines, as well as an anus and a mouth, although I only know that because one orifice has what appears to be teeth. I believe I have discovered the brain right in the center of the body, and it is quite large, but I am sure you guessed that based on the fact that they use advanced weapons and have developed agriculture."

"It was the first thing that crossed my mind," O'Doyle said.

"I am not sure about much else," Sanji said. "We are not even sure if they have a heart or they circulate via tension from their whole body. They are basically a big bag of liquid. I am afraid most of the organs escape known classification."

"So are these aliens or something?"

Sanji stood and flung goo from his hands. "I have no idea. These creatures are something completely new. They are a monumental discovery—a form of intelligent life outside of humanity. It seems unlikely, however, that aliens would come to Earth, bury themselves three miles underground, and live like primitives."

"They've got to be aliens," Veronica said. Her irritation palpable. "How else could they have the same culture on two continents, yet humans have no recorded sightings of these things for at least ten thousand years?"

Sanji shook his head. "It is possible that these creatures evolved along some divergent branch and we have never seen them because they live so deep underground. Remember that humans have never been this far below the surface before. However, there is obviously something else going on here, as the silverbugs and that light in the cave should tell you. And that light does more than just

illuminate. It is a safe bet that it provides energy for the crops to undergo some form of photosynthesis. We have a rather complicated little ecosystem going on down here."

O'Doyle turned back to look down the tunnel, toward the cliff face, toward the light. It just didn't make sense. A light as bright as the sun shone in a cavern of immense size—if Angus's original estimates were true, the cavern measured some twenty-five square miles. He could make out crops growing in the fields below, the central village of small stone buildings, sparkles of reflecting silverbugs, and occasionally the movement of other rocktopi. The scene looked totally idyllic, peaceful.

"The light is obviously artificial," O'Doyle said. He looked at Veronica. "So if our squiggly-wiggles didn't make it, who—or what—did?"

She thought for a second, then shrugged. "I don't know. It's obvious these things didn't build it. They charge at guns with knives and rocks, for god's sake. They show evidence of other primitive cultural behaviors—that is, if we can draw parallels between them and humans."

"What other evidence?"

Sanji answered for her. "They appear to fight among themselves. They show a great deal of what we think is scar tissue. In many places the skin, which has a rough, fibrous pattern, as you see, is crisscrossed with random straight lines."

O'Doyle knelt next to the deflated corpse and lifted a snakelike tentacle. In several places, particularly on the tentacle fingers with which they held the crescent knives, he saw the straight, discolored lines.

"If these marks are scars, that probably means a lot of infighting, perhaps even tribal warfare," Veronica said. "That would be another indication of a very primitive culture."

O'Doyle dropped the limp tentacle to the ground. "So if these things are basically just funny-looking cavemen, who built the light? The same ones responsible for the silverbugs?"

"That would be my guess," Veronica said. "Something is keeping things running down here, both the silverbugs and that artificial light. I think we can rule out a rival mining company now; something else may have built the silverbugs, but no technology in existence could create the rocktopi."

"Call them *Reevus Haakus*," Sanji said.

"The what?" O'Doyle asked, noticing that Veronica shook her head slightly and looked away, embarrassed.

"The *Reevus haakus*," Sanji said. "I took the liberty of naming them. They are a new species, after all. There is nothing like them on the planet that I have ever seen, and that includes any fossil record to my knowledge. I can't think of a single animal related to these creatures."

"I think it is important to note that whatever they are, they are far from healthy. We have identified what we think are congenital defects in almost every one of these creatures: lesions, internal growths that might be some form of cancer, probable skin diseases. Many have withered limbs similar to the ones seen on the small rocktopi we tried to communicate with."

"Congenital?" O'Doyle said. "You mean birth defects?"

Sanji nodded. "It seems that way. Of course, it is difficult to tell with a creature never before studied. The widespread prevalence of diseased traits among all the individuals here would seem to indicate excessive inbreeding."

"What does that mean?"

"They've been down here for thousands of years with no apparent contact with outside members of their species. Unless there are other populations out there, or the population in this complex is *much* larger than it appears, the gene pool would eventually grow stagnant. If they are at all like humans, they breed in pairs and pass combinations of their traits on to their young. Evolutionary theory would indicate that *some* aspects of evolution are likely universal—so I assume they've got the equivalent of genes, the things that hold those inherited traits. When a human egg is fertilized, two halves of a gene set come together to make a functioning whole. In humans, many genes that code for diseases are recessive, meaning that the other half of the pair—the healthy half—dominates, blocking out the diseased trait. But if a child receives that recessive trait from *both* parents, then the disease manifests itself. If you have four children, all with the recessive trait, they will likely breed with people outside your family, people who probably don't have that same recessive trait."

"So the kids don't get the disease," O'Doyle said.

"Exactly. However, if those four children breed with each other, chances are much higher that your grandchild will receive two recessive genes. With a very small population, it works the same way. Sooner or later you start breeding with your direct relatives, and that increases the chances for inherited diseases to appear. That the defects in the rocktopi come from inbreeding, however, is only a theory. We can assume nothing with this unusual species."

The urge to sit and rest filled O'Doyle. His ribs throbbed loudly and his hands felt worse. Yet he couldn't rest—he had to plan their next move. They couldn't scale the cliff, and they couldn't stay. He knew the silverbugs might return at any moment, and shortly after them the rocktopi.

"Finish up professor," O'Doyle said. "I'm sure you'd love to study this all day but we don't have the time." He turned to look at Veronica. "Go talk to Connell. Maybe you can snap him out of it. We need him sharp if we're going to live."

Veronica stared for a moment, wide-eyed fear mixed with some internal rage, then nodded and walked over to Connell. O'Doyle wondered if she would snap. He'd seen people break under stress more times than he could remember. Each time someone wiggled out it was different, and each time he could never say for certain what the "pre-wiggling" signals were. It was just a thing you developed a knack for, a way of knowing who might become a liability, and who you could count on if you wanted to stay alive. He'd survived hundreds of missions—that knack was a key reason for his survival.

And that knack told him Veronica Reeves was damn close to the edge.

11:34 p.m.

Veronica sat down next to Connell. She was glad to rest, even more glad to get away from Sanji's freakish little dissection class. She looked at Connell, whose head hung low as he stared at the powdery ground.

"You look like shit," she said. Connell looked up at her with glassy eyes. His body sagged. His back leaned against the arcing limestone walls, legs flat and spread out before him. He held the H&K tightly against his chest, like a child holding a teddy bear against the night's shadowy demons.

Veronica unconsciously leaned toward him, her shoulder touching lightly against his. Her body ached for human contact. Some paltry reassurance she wouldn't die at the hands of a glowing, tentacled monster wriggling up from depths of hell.

"You sure know how to show a girl a good time."

Connell continued to stare straight ahead, fingers clutching the gun a little tighter, as if Veronica would snatch it away the second he let down his guard. "Yeah," he murmured. "I've always been aces with the ladies." They sat silently together.

"Why aren't you helping Sanji?" Connell asked, his eyes never breaking their glassy stare into nothingness. "I would think this is the find of a lifetime."

"It is... just not *my* lifetime." Her entire professional career now seemed wasted. Somewhere inside she knew this discovery dwarfed anything any archeologist had ever found. Nothing compared to the discovery of another intelligent species.

She'd spent her life investigating a lost human culture, only to find that it was neither lost nor human. Did the rocktopi still exist in Cerro Chaltel? Were they waiting, a mile or two below the surface, waiting to attack anything that moved?

It all seemed so obvious now; twenty-twenty hindsight and Monday-morning quarterbacking. The caves, the depth, the heat, the lack of human remains—now it all seemed to crazily point to boneless aliens glowing with neon-bright intensity. This wasn't some lost tribe, pure and pristine in its primitiveness, it was an absurdity—an abomination. Something that didn't belong. And that was what she'd spent her adult life chasing.

"It's not what I hoped it would be," Veronica said. "It's all wrong."

"Yeah, and this is everything I planned for," Connell said with a snort, turning to glare at her. "I planned on being trapped in this hellhole, paranoid about robot spiders, petrified something will tear my suit so I'll cook to death, too afraid to sleep, killing these... these... *things* just to stay alive. Yeah, I'm happy with the way things turned out."

She stared back at him. The stubble on his chin made him look rough—handsome, perhaps. The blisters on his face were swollen and leaking pus. In some places the skin peeled away, leaving open, oozing sores. She shuddered as she realized her own face must look the same way.

She put her arm around him.

For a second he tensed up even further, perhaps to the point of shattering from his own rigidity, then his body seemed to deflate as if someone had pulled a plug and let all the stress flow down and out of his body. He sagged against Veronica, his head resting heavily on her shoulder. She reached up with her other hand and softly brushed the hair out of his face.

Mack's voice—loud and full of urgency—broke her reverie. "O'Doyle, we've got problems!"

She looked up at Mack, who knelt before the funnel mouth. Then she heard it—heard the sound that in a few hours had become synonymous with fear, with unknowing terror, with a horrid and inescapable death.

click click, click-click-click

Chapter 30

11:32 p.m.

Kayla read the dial on the portable SIGINT unit.

She looked up and around, looking for any sign of movement, of strangely colored lights. The monsters had struck without warning—would they do so again? Her logical side told her she should be afraid of being out in the open, exposed; but her instincts said otherwise. Her instincts told her the monsters had attacked the camp—a very specific, targeted mission. The reality was that it didn't matter which side was right. If she wanted back in the NSA, she had no choice but to be out in the dark, hunting for that little prick's toys.

Kayla moved the unit slowly from left to right, the signal needle swinging to the red when she pointed at his hidden station. Kayla turned back again, making sure she had the direction correct, then walked forward.

That fucking little prick.

The phrase echoed over and over in her mind, usually followed by the word Angus. Kayla walked forward, slowly swinging the portable unit, closing in. Finally she found it. She stared in amazement, and more than a little embarrassment, at a metallic, pyramid-like device. The pyramid was a hodgepodge of equipment: a stainless-steel hydraulic piston that had already pounded a three-inch deep hole into the rocky ground; a trio of seismic sensors, one mounted at the base of each tripod-leg; a small, rubber-encased industrial computer; and a radio transmitter.

If he got a message out, if the police or rescue teams or—God forbid—the media found out about the mine and the monsters, well, then her plan went to hell in a handbasket. Everything hinged on secrecy, on André being the one who controlled the information. Any news coverage and she'd watch that leverage evaporate.

That fucking little prick.

How could she have missed it for this long? The answer was obvious—until a few hours ago, Angus's device didn't stay on all the time. It cycled, signaling every six hours and then only for a few seconds. It was a hard signal to catch, but that didn't make her feel any better. She was trained in signals intelligence, for crying out loud, and at one time the U.S. Government considered her the best in the world. To be outfoxed by a cock-sucking scientist was simply too much.

That fucking little prick.

He'd invented a way to communicate with the surface from who knew how far underground. The system also probably served some mapping function, like an underground GPS with the pyramid devices taking the place of satellites. If that was the case, there were more of these things, at least three for triangulation

purposes. And she'd have to track down every single one. How fucking long would that take?

She'd underestimated Angus Kool. She should have followed him from the get-go. He talked to this pyramid-like machine from around three miles underground via rhythmic patterns of seismic waves. The unit, in turn, broadcast those messages into the air. The system was pure genius.

Kayla reached into the pyramid and yanked the antennae from the transmitter. Maybe the device would yield some information. She picked up the surprisingly light device and carried it back to her warren. She didn't have time to examine it now, because she had to find the rest of the fucking little prick's handiwork.

11:42 p.m.

Connell stared out the funnel. The line of silverbugs stretched off into the distance, jerking and convulsing. "Got any bright ideas, O'Doyle?"

"No sir," O'Doyle said. "I was hoping you might have something clever." O'Doyle had spread the H&K rounds evenly among them—Connell had only five shots in his weapon. Definitely not enough to waste on a seemingly endless supply of jittering silverbugs. The machines seemed to pick up on this fact somehow; the line ran from the tunnel edge back as far as they could see, over the mass of deflated rocktopi corpses littering the tunnel floor.

O'Doyle turned toward Sanji and Veronica. Fear gripped their faces and stole their breath. "You two keep an eye on those cracks," O'Doyle said. "You do the same, Mack."

Mack nodded slowly and kept his hand on the wall, steadying himself. He looked around slowly, blankly, the pain in his head evident in his every movement.

Connell peered intently down the tunnel, looking for a flash of color. He spoke quietly, so that only O'Doyle could hear. "We're not going to be able to hold off another attack."

"I know that," O'Doyle said softly.

The cave filled with the sound of clicks and whirs and buzzes, all the ambiance of the silverbug's sickening, jerking dance. No one spoke.

Then, finally, the wait ended.

The scraping dead-leaf sound filtered up the tunnel like the dry hissing of a poisonous snake, slowly building into a raspy cacophony that melded with the mechanical silverbug sounds. Screeches poked at the air like needles punched into eardrums. The wafting smell of dog shit and rotting fruit made Connell's nose wrinkle involuntarily.

They came down the tunnel, moving slower this time, no longer hurtling forward. They moved at a deliberate pace, like a cat sneaking up on an unsuspecting squirrel. Their light looked different ... muted.

"Let's make them think about coming closer," O'Doyle whispered as he hugged the H&K to his shoulder, looked down the sight and squeezed off a single shot.

clank

O'Doyle's head snapped up as he and Connell stared into the tunnel's dimness. They'd both expected a rocktopi's screeching death-squeal, but only heard the sound of a bullet ricochet off... metal?

Steadily the rocktopi moved closer, into the headlamp light, revealing both the reason for their deliberate pace and for the sound of the ricochet. Like a phalanx of Roman soldiers, the rocktopi moved forward carrying shields of glossy metal that cast back distorted headlamp reflections.

"This is not good," O'Doyle said.

Connell counted three shields pushed edge to edge in the narrow tunnel, moving slowly forward like the plunger of a syringe. He couldn't make out how many rocktopi perched behind the moving metal wall. The shields, rectangular and roughly hewn, pressed forward, the promise of death huddled behind them.

They were stuck between a bottleneck of rocktopi and a two-hundred-foot drop. The flashing, glowing creatures pressed closer, closer, taking their time. Silverbug clicks and whirs excitedly filled the air, accompanied by the occasional small screech emanating from behind the silvery shields.

"We've got to go down the cliff," Connell said, unable to stop himself from slowly backing up.

O'Doyle shook his head. "You know we'll never make it."

"It's either some of us make it or we all die."

"But you can't get down with your knee," O'Doyle said sternly.

"I'm not going."

O'Doyle looked away from the oncoming threat and gaped incredulously.

"I'm staying right here," Connell said. "Mack too. We'll have to let the rocktopi get close before we can use the guns accurately. You get the rest of the party as far down as you can. I'm still in charge here and you'll do what I tell you. Now move!"

O'Doyle blinked a few times, seemingly unable to comprehend the situation, then turned and sprinted the short distance to the others.

Connell turned to face the oncoming death. Only forty yards separated him from the metal phalanx. He felt fear spin wildly through his stomach and chest. He easily fought down the urge to turn and run—mostly because there was nowhere to go. Five shots. He'd gotten everyone into this, after all, and if anyone had to die, it seemed logical he be the next.

A wave of sweat broke out on his brow, trickling down his cheeks, stinging his numerous blisters. His grip tightened on the weapon, its feel and weight now familiar and comforting. He shuddered at unbidden thoughts of platinum knives tearing into his belly, spilling his blood and intestines all over the dirty cave. A gut wound was supposedly the worst way to go. Would he still be alive when they hacked him to pieces?

He tried to swallow but couldn't. He stood helpless, waiting for the right moment, as the rocktopi closed the distance to thirty yards. Their subtle lights cast soft red and orange hues on the tunnel's walls and ceiling. The dull gleam of his headlamp reflected off the three shields aligned in the front rank. The shields' edges gleamed with a razor's brightness, leaving streamers of afterglow illusion dancing on his retinas. They looked as if they'd just been cut from a large, slightly curved sheet of metal, the fronts dull with age while the thick edges flashed as his head turned from one to the next to the next.

He suddenly missed his wife more than ever. For the first time he felt grateful she was dead. She wouldn't hear of a husband hacked to pieces by some alien

monstrosity deep in the Earth's bowels. He wished he could look at her picture one last time before he died.

The rocktopi closed to twenty yards, their rancid odor almost overpowering. He saw glowing bodies and the onyx-colored spots peeking out from the spaces between shields. His body started shaking uncontrollably. He raised the gun and tried to draw a steady aim, but the weapon's barrel twitched in time with his rebellious muscles.

He fired. The bullet smacked dead center into the center shield, bouncing off with a spark and a whine, disappearing unseen into the tunnel's endless dark spaces.

Four shots left.

The rocktopi kept coming.

"Connell, get back here!" Veronica screamed, "get back here now!"

All his body needed was an excuse. He turned away from the funnel mouth and ran like a madman, afraid to look over his shoulder, afraid to find out if the rocktopi would drop their shields and give chase. He reached the others in an instant near the cliff's edge, and almost tripped over his own feet in sudden shock.

There, hanging down from a rope just in front of the cave's end, perched a smiling Angus Kool, swinging slightly from side to side like a spider caught in a light breeze.

Chapter 31

11:46 p.m.

Connell stared in slack-jawed awe. Angus hung from some unseen point above the cave mouth, dressed in full rappelling gear atop a dirty KoolSuit. Two other ropes hung down, one on either side of him, harnesses attached. Veronica and Sanji scrambled into the rigs, Lybrand and Mack helping the hurried effort.

"Hey boss," Angus said. "Glad to see me?"

"Where the hell did you come from?"

"Who cares?" said O'Doyle, peering worriedly down the tunnel at the rocktopi's slow, methodical advance. "He's here and we've got a way out."

"You didn't think I was going to let someone else see all this splendor first, did you?" Angus asked.

"You're Kilroy," Connell said. Angus only smiled as Veronica expertly scrambled up the rope. Sanji followed, moving with impressive speed for someone of his girth. Within seconds, both moved past the opening's top edge and disappeared from sight.

"We've got company," O'Doyle said.

Connell turned to once again face the enemy. The first of the shield bearers worked its way through the funnel mouth, less than twenty yards away. The shields scraped against rock, making a sound like a church bell dragged over gravel.

The bell tolls for me, Connell thought crazily. *Hemingway would have loved this macho crap.*

Like lethal turtles, the rocktopi moved slowly forward, a few inches at a time, their small, excited screeches drowning out the rustling-leaf sound and incessant silverbug noise.

"Angus said Mr. Wright's position is only twenty feet above us," O'Doyle said. "We've got to hold the rocktopi for a few minutes, so the professors can get up and send the ropes back down. We'll send Mack and Lybrand up next."

Connell nodded, a grim acceptance of the situation still fixed in his mind. He moved toward the closing rocktopi phalanx. O'Doyle followed. The second shield bearer was already through and lining up next to the first. The third member quickly oozed through the funnel and worked the shield into position. Behind the phalanx, waiting to pour through the funnel, Connell heard the rocktopi pack screeching with excitement, perhaps even anticipation.

His hands seemed suddenly steady and sure. He saw the onyx eyespots peeking out between the shields. Connell raised his H&K and fired. A deafening, shuddering screech rewarded his aim. The center shield fell forward with a monstrous *clang* and a billowing puff of cave dust. The creature dropped to the floor, writhing in sickening pain.

O'Doyle seized the opportunity, rapidly firing three times through the unexpected phalanx opening. Connell saw two rocktopi squirm and thrash in the funnel mouth, like food half in and half out of a whirring garbage disposal. Screeching filled the cavern, high pitched and painful, tearing at his ears far worse than did the weapons' loud report. The front rocktopi rank foundered in confusion, their whirling tentacles flinging gooey purple blood from their fresh wounds. O'Doyle fired his last round into the mass, then tossed the H&K away and drew his Beretta.

Behind them, they heard Angus calling them back. "Two more, let's go, let's go!"

"Fall back to the cliff!" O'Doyle yelled, backing up quickly. The rocktopi pushed their wounded and dying comrades out of the way and poured through the funnel, trying to stay behind the two standing shields. Connell turned and ran to the cliff's edge. Lybrand started up the rope. O'Doyle fastened Mack into the harness. Lybrand had almost cleared the top of the cave when she suddenly stopped climbing.

"Patrick, watch out!"

Like a frog's tongue nailing a passing fly, a thick tentacle holding a glistening platinum knife shot out of a wall crack. O'Doyle dove to the ground. The knife's tip sliced his cheek, sending a thin streamer of blood onto the sand. He rolled away from the rocktopi and away from the cliff as the monster poured through the crack.

Moving with blinding, boneless speed, it sprang toward Mack. He tried to dive away, but the harness held him motionless, like a worm on a hook. Mack screamed once as angry glowing-orange tentacles wrapped around him like an octopus snagging an unwary fish. Mack smashed his fists into the flashing, nightmarish monstrosity, each of his weak punches hitting with the sound of a fist slapping raw hamburger. His face contorted with a powerful scream as a platinum

knife flashed once, came up again trailing an arcing gout of blood, then flashed a second time.

O'Doyle jumped to his feet and pressed the muzzle of his Beretta against the rocktopi's body. He pulled the trigger three times, emptying the last of his ammunition. The creature screamed with a pitiful wail and released Mack, tentacles swinging wildly, teetering on the cliff's edge. The smell of rotting meat, thick and almost overpowering, filled the air.

The smell somehow snapped Connell out of his horrified daze. With a roar of frustration and rage, he sprinted at the rocktopi and put a full-speed shoulder into the soft body. The impact felt satisfyingly solid. The rocktopi sailed out over the cliff and plummeted with a fading screech.

Lybrand screamed a second warning. "Here they come!"

Connell turned just in time to see a massive rocktopi diving toward him like a hellish cross between a lion and a whip-limbed starfish, a pair of crescent-shaped platinum knives arcing forward point first. Three bullets from Lybrand's H&K rent the air as the creature fell on Connell, knocking him to the ground with a linebacker-hard collision.

Its reeking skin felt pliant and raspy, like rubbery sandpaper, yet the creature was solid and heavy. Connell lashed out against the rocktopi, but it was like punching a half-deflated waterbed. He viciously squirmed out from under the motionless body. Lybrand still hung from her rope, her Beretta drawn, her H&K cast away. Angus was gone and Mack hung limply from his harness like meat on a hook, his blood cascading down in audible rivulets, his intestines dangling wet and pinkish-white into the fine sand.

Connell snatched up his H&K, turned and fired his last three shots, catching two of the rushing rocktopi. Both dropped to the rock-strewn ground like half-full sacks of grain—one fell motionless, while the other jittered and convulsed with a sickening resemblance to a large, glowing Jell-O mold. The shots seemed to slow the rocktopi advance. The remaining creatures, perhaps twenty of them, held back, only ten feet away, arms waving like whips, skin flashing like multicolored police lights, screeches ripping the air.

O'Doyle cut the rope connected to Mack's harness. The limp Aussie fell motionless to the ground at Connell's feet, side by side with the dead rocktopi.

Another harness, apparently Angus's, dropped with a jingling of buckles between Connell and O'Doyle. Connell stepped over the dead bodies and stumbled into the still-swinging harness.

"They're rushing us!" Lybrand screamed. Still swinging lightly at the rope's end, she ripped off three rounds from the Beretta. She pulled the trigger a fourth time—it clicked on empty.

The last bullet was gone.

The three of them scrambled to climb up and away from the cliff's edge. O'Doyle started pulling his body up what had been Mack's rope. Connell wrapped his arms in the harness and felt himself being yanked upwards while Lybrand expertly slithered up the climbing rig.

Connell felt a tentacle grab at his foot like the caress of a python reaching for a crushable meal. He kicked hard but hit only empty air. Another long tentacle shot out—he saw a silvery flash and felt searing, scorching pain rip through his

shoulder. Blood spilled down his chest and side—it looked purple in the cavern's strange blue light. A baseball-sized rock sailed through the air and glanced off his temple, yet he held on. He felt himself yanked upwards as his unseen helpers pulled him out of the rocktopi's reach.

O'Doyle screamed below him. The big man's face contorted in agony but he continued up the rope, spinning wildly like a trick yo-yo. Connell saw a platinum knife buried deep in O'Doyle's leg, blood spurting free, falling in bomb-run droplets to the ground some two hundred feet below. Mack's body was already invisible, covered by a dozen hacking, slashing, glowing rocktopi that tore into his corpse.

Suddenly Connell's upward pull ended. Rough hands dragged him onto another flat stone cliff. He saw both his blood and a strange, yellowish fluid splashing on the rock, making it slick and wet. Hands flashed at his chest, he looked up to see Randy Wright moving to free him from the tangled harness. Off to Connell's right, he saw Veronica and Sanji haul Lybrand over the cliff's edge. Seconds later O'Doyle cleared the edge, pulling himself up with a final, powerful effort, his face wrenched with agony. The wicked knife jutted from his thigh.

Connell closed his eyes. A sudden silence gripped the cliff, broken only by ragged breathing and O'Doyle's soft, painful moans. Connell rolled away from the cliff's edge and sat up, hand pressed to his stinging shoulder.

"So hot," he heard O'Doyle mumble. "So hot."

As if O'Doyle's words were a trigger, Connell's mind registered the massive temperature swell. The heat hit him as if he'd stepped into a kiln. He laid back, struggling to breathe, feeling waves of heat wash over him. Every square inch of his body prickled and burned with a million tiny bee stings.

"Their suits," he heard Lybrand yell in a dreamy, far-off voice. "They're losing all the coolant!"

Connell tried to speak, but nothing came out, and suddenly all he could think about were the black spots that danced maddeningly in his vision.

Connell felt hands lift him, gently but firmly, and carry him away from the cliff's edge. The spots in his vision widened, growing even blacker, until they were spots no more, filling his vision, blocking out the light.

BOOK V

The Rocktopi.

Chapter 32

August 28, 5:21 a.m.

Kayla found herself somewhere between admiration and rage. Squatting on her heels, she stared at the last of the pyramid-like devices Angus had scattered all over the mountain. She appreciated the genius that had gone into building the object, but at the same time wanted to slice open the builder's stomach and spread his entrails on the cool morning ground.

She stood, took two steps back, and fired her Steyr GB-80 at the machine. It shattered into a dozen useless pieces of smoldering, twisted metal and ripped wires.

Now the little prick was completely cut off. He'd cost her five precious hours, time spent tracking down all six of the hidden machines.

You fucking little prick.

She had to get to him. Who knew what other clever little methods he had, what other tactics he might use to call for help? She had to nail his ass before he could do that. He was getting the pliers, all right, and this time she wouldn't stop with just a knuckle or two.

Hopefully the unit she'd taken back to her warren could provide some information. He was down there, she just knew it.

5:34 a.m.

15,538 feet below the surface

Connell woke with a start, eyes wide open and hunting for any sign of rocktopi. His shoulder throbbed with pain and his back screamed with complaint. He heard a strange crackling sound, but didn't know if it was real or just a creation of his fogged head. He looked around wildly, but saw only the others in the party, sleeping the sleep of the dead.

"Connell, relax, it's okay," Veronica said groggily, putting a hand on his good shoulder. She had been sleeping beside him.

"Where are we?"

"We're in a cave that Angus and Randy sealed off with rocks. We're safe. For now, at least."

Connell looked at her. Concern showed through her weariness. Had she been watching over him? Visions of Mack's massacred body flashed through his head. "How long have I been out?"

"About five hours. We stitched up your shoulder as best we could. We didn't have any surgical thread; we had to use fibers from one of the ropes. You're going to have a nasty scar. Angus used up all the patches to fix up your and O'Doyle's suits. You've lost a lot of blood. You need to rest."

"I can't rest, Veronica." Connell grunted as he slowly stood, ignoring the pain in his knee, back and shoulder. "How is O'Doyle?"

"He's sleeping. We stitched him up too and patched his KoolSuit. He'll probably be okay as long as we don't move him for awhile."

"How long is awhile?"

"I'd say we can't move him for at least a day."

A day. They couldn't wait a day. They couldn't even afford to wait an hour. "Wake everyone up," he said, slowly flexing his wounded shoulder, testing its abilities. "We've got to figure out the next step."

5:36 a.m.

The tiny cave held few shadows, thanks to the small but powerful lights provided by Angus. The scrambler's crackling buzz filled the air. Everyone gathered in a circle at the cave's center, gazing up at Connell. They all looked exhausted, zombies staring at him with combinations of fear, anger, and hopelessness.

Connell glared at Angus. As of that moment, their lives rested on the scientist's homemade scrambler. "We need to get caught up on how you found us and why we're safe here, as you claim."

Angus appeared calm and optimistic. Dirt, dust, and even a little dried blood smeared his bright yellow KoolSuit, but his face looked clean, and his wild red hair stuck out in tufts. Randy just stared at the ground.

"Well, we faked the lab accident for starters," Angus said, standing up to talk as if he were addressing a board meeting. "I hope that didn't cause anyone grief." Angus ignored O'Doyle's murderous glare. The big man was propped up against a boulder, his leg isolated in a makeshift splint fashioned from a cannibalized backpack.

"Randy and I found another entrance," Angus said. "It wasn't visible with the initial computer models, but some further refinement made it clear. I believe it's the same entrance that Sonny talked about in his report, the one where the geology students disappeared."

Connell felt his temper rising. "Why didn't you tell me you found another way in?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't let me in the caves until they'd been explored, *despite* my notable experience in the field," Angus said. "I discovered this cave system and I deserved to be the first person in here. We came in that entrance and moved toward the Picture Cavern, as you call it, because we knew that would be the first major discovery point for Mack and his crew."

"That's why you planted the sign," Connell said. "You couldn't just be the first one in, you had to let everyone else know that they *weren't* the first."

"Well, we had to be able to prove it," Angus said. "The signs were clear proof that we were there before anyone else. We planted one in that cavern and seven others elsewhere throughout the complex. We had a two-day head start on you all. Randy and I are highly skilled spelunkers, so we've covered a great deal of territory. More than anyone else could have managed, I'd say. As to why we're safe here, Randy and I captured and dissected one of the artificial life robots."

"The artificial what?" Lybrand asked.

"The silverbugs," Connell said, never taking his narrowed eyes off Angus.

The word seemed to amuse Angus. "Silverbugs? How quaint. Very well, we captured a *silverbug* and dissected it." Angus related the story of the dissection and the events leading from there to the rescue on the cliff. The news that the silverbugs were made from platinum stunned Connell, but he was far more shocked to learn of the silverbugs providing the phalanx shields.

"You're telling us," O'Doyle said in a weak voice, "that the rocktopi didn't think of the shields, but the robots did?"

"It certainly looked that way," Angus said. "The rocktopi may have instructed the silverbugs to go make the shields, but I doubt it. I'd be surprised if beings that use knives and rocks against firearms can work with such advanced machines. It appeared to me that the silverbugs told—or perhaps *showed* is a better word—the rocktopi where to go."

"It doesn't matter," Connell said. "What we need to do is get everyone out of here. Angus, can you tell us how we can do that?"

Angus sighed and pulled the small monitor out of his bag. He quickly explained how the thumper navigation system worked and its accuracy. Randy continued to look at the ground, as if he knew what was coming.

Connell felt his anger rise even further. His hands involuntarily tightened into fists. "And you're telling me, Angus, that you've had a perfect map of these caves and you didn't inform me?"

Angus quickly looked around, seeing five pairs of tired eyes fix on him with murderous hatred.

"I didn't think anyone would need it," he said, his voice an anxious squeak. "I mean, the map I gave Mack was already a technological feat of genius, really amazing stuff. Randy and I planned on being back today—I'd have the map for Mack before he penetrated far into the caves. I was going to show you the system then. I—"

Connell's fist smashed into Angus's nose, cutting off the explanation. Angus took one small step backwards, then fell hard on his ass. Mack had been a good man. The thumper map might have kept them out of harm's way, might have led them somewhere besides the dead-end cliff. Connell fought to control his rage: they needed Angus if they were all to get out alive.

Angus looked at Connell through tearing eyes. His fingers touched his nose and came away covered in blood. "Are you crazy? Why would you hit *me*?"

Connell stepped forward, kicking Angus hard in the stomach. Angus let out a *whoof* as air vacated his lungs, then rolled on his back and on his side, fighting for breath.

Connell felt strong arms wrap around his chest, pulling him away. The arms roughly turned him around—Connell found himself facing Sanji.

"Calm down *now*," Sanji said, a look of concern on his face. "We need Angus, so stop this. This is not helping anything."

Connell blinked a few times, quickly regaining his composure. He nodded curtly. Sanji let him go. Connell breathed deeply and slowly, then walked over to Angus, who still struggled for breath. Connell knelt and grabbed Angus by his red hair, forcing him to look up.

"You're going to get us out of here, understand?" Connell said, staring into Angus's eyes, which were wide and white with fear. "You're going to tell us everything and you're not going to hide anything ever again. Do you understand?"

Angus nodded quickly.

Connell let him go and walked to a far corner of the cave. He didn't care about Angus's genius anymore, or what Angus could do for EarthCore. He didn't care about EarthCore, come to think of it. And, he realized, he didn't care about the platinum, or the money it would bring.

All he cared about was getting these people out alive.

7:25 a.m.

You little fucking prick.

He'd found another way in. Kayla stared at the industrial computer's little screen, looking at a detailed map. The map showed a second way into the tunnels, a path labeled "The Linus Highway." She downloaded the map into a handheld unit.

It wasn't too late. She could still pull it off. She could beat them all, Connell, André, and especially Angus Kool. Angus wanted her to fail? He wanted someone to come save him from the subterranean monsters?

No-no-no. No way, no how, little Angus.

Nobody was coming to help them. The little bastard *wanted* her to fail. He *wanted* her to remain the dishonorably discharged embarrassment to the NSA.

The monsters were down there, but she only needed one. Hell, she only needed a *piece* of one. As long as she was careful, she could get her sample and make it safely back to the surface.

And maybe, if she was lucky, she might find Angus. She wanted to find him, find his little ass and scrape it off her shoe. Just like she'd done with Cho. Angus wouldn't get away with this. He thought he was so fucking smart, a regular little genius, but she was no dummy, no sir, not by a fucking long shot.

No-no-no. No way no how.

Kayla dug into her canvas bag and removed the KoolSuit she'd stolen from the miner's hut. In retrospect, it was a damn good thing she'd grabbed it when she had—the attack struck less than half an hour after she'd slid back into her warren. She buckled on her web gear over the yellow suit, double-checked her handheld map, double-checked the COMSEC settings, grabbed the Marco/Polo unit and started up the mountain.

7:21 a.m.

Connell watched Angus's finger trace patterns on the tiny monitor, illustrating the way out of the tunnel complex. Everyone huddled around them, trying to get a glimpse at a possible escape, trying to get a glimpse of hope.

Angus finished his explanation. Connell mulled over the possibilities the plan presented. "So, you're saying the fastest way out of here is by reaching the Dense Mass?"

"You got it," Angus said, his voice nasally due to a first-aid kit cotton ball stuffed into each nostril. "This is the tunnel Randy and I came down. We call it the Linus Highway. If you look, it's pretty much a straight shot to the Dense Mass. About halfway down the Linus Highway, we branched off on a side tunnel and made our way to the Picture Cavern."

"So you haven't been to the Dense Mass?" Sanji asked.

"No, we left that for Connell and Mack," Angus said, sounding quite magnanimous. "If the mine shaft is as bad as Mack told you, then the Linus Highway is the only way out of the mountain." Angus tapped the keys on the monitor, bringing up a closer view of the tunnels. A flashing orange dot pulsed amidst yellow lines that indicated the network of tunnels. Red dots flickered at the map's edge, close to the orange dot.

"Our position on this map was updated at 5:19 a.m. The orange dot is us," Angus said. "The red dots are silverbugs."

Lybrand went rigid with alarm. "They're right on top of us!"

"It just looks that way on the map," Randy said, speaking up for the first time since they'd entered the hideaway. "We planted motion sensors all over this area before we dropped down to rescue you. We were scrambling them when we sealed off this cave, so they don't know we're here."

"How do you know that?" Lybrand said.

"Because they're just wandering," Angus said, obviously annoyed. "When they know someone is present, they exhibit very structured behavior."

"We noticed," Veronica said.

Angus continued. "Now we could go around to that shaft pretty much the same way Randy and I came to rescue you. It took us just under thirty minutes to get from the far edge of the kidney-shaped cavern to where we are now. However, Randy and I can move fast and quiet. Considering the wounded we have, that route would take about fifty-five minutes, possibly an hour. From there we would backtrack the path Randy and I followed and end up at the Linus Highway, then head for the surface. We know where we're going, but it's a long trip and there's many difficult areas that will slow us down. Also, I think we'd be exposed to rocktopi that whole time. With this crew, we'd sound like a bull in a china shop."

"The only thing that really makes sense is for Randy and I to go out alone and bring back help."

"No," Connell said in a cold voice. "Not even an option. We go together."

Angus glared at Connell, then turned his attention back to the computer.

His fingers tapped the keys, and one yellow band glowed brighter than the rest. It pointed down into the large block of green they'd come to recognize as the Dense Mass, then pointed upwards, off the screen.

"If we take this route, we'll be to the Dense Mass in about twenty-five minutes," Angus said, "From there we go straight up the Linus Highway and out of this hell hole."

"It looks steep," O'Doyle said.

"It is, but it has about a six-foot ceiling," Angus said. "We can walk standing up most of the way. There's only about a twenty-yard crawl at the end that takes us to the outside of the mountain. The whole thing is about a thirty-five degree incline for over three miles."

The words *three miles* made Connell suddenly conscious of the throbbing pain in his knee. He looked from the map to Angus. "How long will that take us?"

"It depends on how fast you all can move," Angus said.

"And we don't even know what's at the Dense Mass," O'Doyle said. "As far as we know it could be Rocktopi Central Station."

Angus's eyes narrowed to petulant little slits. "Well you all can just sit here and die if you like. The scrambler batteries aren't going to last forever and when they're gone the silverbugs will lead the rocktopi right to you. But hey, I'm not in charge here, so why don't you all figure it out."

Connell casually reached down and grabbed Angus's trapezius muscle, where the shoulder meets the neck, and squeezed hard. He felt Angus tense up instantly. "Why don't you calm down, Angus?" Connell said. "We're weighing our options. So relax." He let go.

Angus glared at him defiantly. "You can weigh your options all you want, but this is the best way out, the fastest, and probably our best bet to avoid attack."

Connell didn't have a better idea. Even though Angus was a little bastard, he was still the expert in this situation, and no one else had any idea of what to do. "All right everyone," Connell said, trying to ignore the pain in his knee as he stood. "Let's get packed up. We're getting out of here."

7:30 a.m.

Kayla finished worming her way through the narrow opening, stood, brushed off her KoolSuit, and donned her starlight goggles. It seemed likely that Angus and the others were already dead. The creatures' attack on the camp had been vicious and definitive. If they'd done that on the surface, she wondered how deadly they were in the deep, hot caves. It was one thing to move around on the desert floor, able to see danger coming hundreds of yards away. It was quite another to move into the caves... where the things *lived*.

And yet if they were that dangerous, why wasn't Angus killed much earlier? He was obviously alive long enough to send the SOS, which in turn meant there was no reason for her to assume that he wasn't still alive.

Fucking little prick.

And if he'd lived, then she had to assume Connell and the others had also escaped the creatures' deadly attentions.

The handheld computer map's three dimensions made it difficult to navigate, but the faggots' trail was ridiculously easy to follow. Angus and Randy knew nothing of covering their tracks.

According to the map, the tunnel she currently stood in went about three miles and wound up at the Dense Mass. As she walked, several tunnels branched off in every direction, each one a nameless passage of stone, rock, and blackness. She decided to follow the footprints as long as she could and see what the Marco/Polo unit turned up. So far it read nothing. Angus and the others—if there were any others—were apparently out of range.

Figures he'd make it hard on me, the little fucking prick. Gonna scrape him off my shoe.

Kayla read the map cautiously, marking off each tunnel as she passed, careful to keep her location exact and precise. She followed the tracks and headed straight for the Dense Mass.

7:38 a.m.

As the party prepared to move out, Connell took one last look at the tiny monitor. He didn't want to miss a thing. If there was anything that could add to their chances of survival, he wanted to imbed it in his brain. With his finger, he traced a series of bubble-shaped curves running along the outside edge of the enormous Dense Mass cavern.

"Angus," Connell said, pointing to the curves. "What are all those?"

"I'm not sure," Angus said. "I think they are some kind of alcove, a side-cave, maybe. They don't appear to go anywhere, though—no exit tunnels."

Connell saw something familiar—familiar and still unexplained. "Blow it up a bit more," Connell said. Angus complied, muttering words under his breath that Connell couldn't make out.

"There," Connell said. He jabbed his finger at a bright yellow line that started at the Dense Mass and pointed straight down, deep into the Earth's bowels.

"That line appears to go down, what, four miles and even farther?"

"Well, four miles is the ultimate maximum range of the map. So there's no telling how far down it goes."

"What do you think it's for?"

"I really don't know," Angus said. "It appears to be perfectly straight, so it's obviously artificial."

"But you said all the tunnels we're in now are artificial and they're not straight or even smooth," Connell countered. "Why would this one be different?"

"Maybe it's a freaking tunnel to China," Angus said, his face twisted into a sneer. "I'll tell you what—when I grow some tentacles and my ass starts flashing orange and red, I'll let you know what I think it is." He stormed off, leaving Connell to fume and stare at the monitor, stare at the yellow line heading straight down toward the Earth's center.

Chapter 33

7:40 a.m.

Sonny lay perfectly still, as rigid as a piece of bone-dry cottonwood half-buried in the sand. He watched the bitch move higher up the peak until she disappeared among the rocks.

Kayla. He'd heard her name during her little bargaining session with someone named "André."

At least he had a name. And a piece of her history—she used to be in the NSA, and wanted back into the ranks in a bad way.

Now he had what he needed, and it was time to go. He didn't like the way she had carried her weapon up and at the ready, as if she'd expected a target to pop up at any second. She had walked up the slope and disappeared over a ridge. She seemed to be heading straight for Angus's entrance. That worked for Sonny, maybe she'd go in and never come back out again.

He waited, patiently. No point in rushing things, not after all this waiting. He'd give her another twenty minutes, and wouldn't move a muscle until those twenty minutes passed with no sign of Miss Kayla.

7:43 a.m.

"How do you feel?" Lybrand asked, wiping a bead of sweat off O'Doyle's brow. The climb to the surface was going to be pure hell for him. But he was going to make it. She'd destroy anything that got in his way.

"How do you think I feel?" O'Doyle said, obviously angry and in pain, yet his voice held tenderness when he spoke to her. He gestured to the huge pack strapped to Lybrand's back. O'Doyle could barely walk, and without a word Lybrand had taken the job of carrying all his gear. "I'm embarrassed and humiliated, that's how I feel."

"Don't worry about the extra stuff, I can carry it," Lybrand said with a small smile. "I meant how does your leg feel?"

"It's bad," O'Doyle said quietly, looking away from her. She tried to imagine his pain; the platinum knife had sliced into his quadriceps, penetrating so deep the point hit bone. To call the surgery on his leg crude was an understatement. Sanji had made do with needles designed to work with the KoolSuit's' industrial materials, not human skin. For thread they'd used fibers from one of the ropes. O'Doyle's scars would be horrible.

"Wish I had some morphine, fuck, even some Tylenol," O'Doyle said in a rare complaint. "It hurts bad. If the shit starts up again with the rocktopi, I don't think the stitches are going to hold."

O'Doyle's face flushed red and he looked toward the ground. "I should be leading the way out," he said. "Not limping along, slowing everyone down."

She squeezed his hand, trying to reassure him that everything would be all right, that they would make it. She looked at their clasped fingers; stubby with muscle, skin covered with scars, knuckles big and thick. There was little difference between their hands, save for that his were much larger. She'd often looked at her ugly hands and wondered if anyone would ever want to hold them. O'Doyle wanted to. He didn't care what they looked like.

"We're getting out of here," she said. "I promise you that. We'll make it out together."

She lay her forehead on his solid shoulder, and he gently stroked her hair.

7:48 a.m.

Connell folded up the monitor and handed it to Randy, who stashed it in his backpack. The party lined up as they'd planned—Angus and Randy far out in front with the jammer, then Lybrand and O'Doyle followed by Sanji and Veronica. Connell brought up the rear, close enough so the professors could help him if he started to grow weak from his wounds.

Connell wanted Lybrand in the rear, protecting their back, but one glimpse of her shouldering O'Doyle's weight told him not to bother asking. Randy and Angus worked well together; best to have them far ahead where the noise from the rest of the party was barely audible. Connell planned on protecting everyone's back as best he could—armed with only a knife.

No more guns. Two knives for the whole party; Lybrand carried the other. Their best weapon? A hotwired radio that jammed the silverbugs. If the rocktopi attacked, the battle wouldn't last long. They still had enough batteries to power the headlamps for at least another twenty-four hours—hopefully they'd be on the surface before that.

Sanji cleared the rocks from the low entrance to the cave, exposing the tunnel on the other side. Angus and Randy led the way out.

Chapter 34

8:02 a.m.

Nerves screaming at him to get away, Sonny slipped into the bitch's warren, looking for something to mess up her plans. Sure, he had a name, he had some history, but he just couldn't pass up the chance to mess with her. He wouldn't be able to leave until he did *something* to screw up her plans.

She'd packed a surprising amount of equipment into the small cubbyhole. The military-looking radio thing played a steady stream of quiet static. A backpack full of C-rations, protein bars, and bottled water. A canvas bag full of electronic equipment. A purse.

Sonny scanned the horizon before going through the small leather purse. Still no sign of her. Lipstick. Keys. A stick of Wrigley's gum. Some lint. As he dug, his fingers felt something in the liner. A tug opened up a hidden pocket. Inside were ID badges: Carrie Thomas, private investigator; Melissa Wilson, detective, Salt Lake City Police Department; Harriet McGuire, FBI; Amy Smith, reporter, *MiningWorld* magazine.

"Came prepared, didn't you, Ms. Meyers?"

Sonny set the purse down and kept snooping. He found a box of fire-blackened metal bits, pieces of electronics she'd scavenged from the lab's wreckage.

He saw the list, the same one she'd carried down into the camp. Some of the names had thick lines through them—others remained clear and legible. *Survivors*, Sonny thought, staring with amazement. *Could they still be alive?*

Keys. The word hit him like a slap. *Keys*. Sonny grabbed her purse and pulled out the key ring. It glinted in the morning sunlight. He used his binoculars to scan the horizon once more. Seeing nothing, he laughed as he stepped out of the warren and walked to her black Land Rover.

"Let's see you run your operation without transportation, bitch," Sonny said. He opened the driver's door and hopped in. Cho's body had been in here, in the back, wrapped in plastic like so much trash.

Taking one last look around, Sonny started the engine. "Get them out of there, Connell," Sonny said. "Get them out of there and I'll be waiting."

Sonny gunned the engine and shot down the slope, away from Funeral Mountain.

8:11 a.m.

15,798 feet below the surface

Veronica's fingers traced the detailed carvings. Such delicate work, such masterful beauty from such a savage race.

"Veronica, we can't look at the carvings anymore," Connell said, his voice filled with urgency. He pulled gently at her arm. "Come on, we have to go. If Angus gets too far ahead of us we lose the scrambler's effect."

"Just one more moment, Connell," she said absently. "I'm beginning to piece together their religion." Despite her disgust, her revulsion at the rocktopi and her shattering disappointment of a career spent missing the obvious, she couldn't completely disassociate from her scientific curiosity. She knew they had to move, and move fast, but the carvings held answers that she'd sought for seven years at Cerro Chaltel. She would only keep them a few seconds.

This far down in the tunnels the carvings covered almost everything, as if they'd been waiting millennia just for her, giving her the key to solve the puzzles discovered at Cerro Chaltel. At first only a few carvings graced the walls, but as they moved closer to the Dense Mass the detailed art grew increasingly concentrated.

Sanji leaned forward, peering at the carvings. "What do you see, Roni?"

"First of all, have you noticed how well preserved these carvings are? The closer we move to the Dense Mass, the less vandalism and graffiti we see. Most of these carvings haven't been drawn over. It almost seems as if the closer we get to the Dense Mass, the more sacred the carvings. It's as if the Dense Mass is their religion's main altar, their Mecca or Jerusalem."

Connell also peered closer. Despite his anxiety over their precarious situation, she could read the curiosity on his face. "Why do you say religion?"

"Look at these carvings," Veronica said, dropping to one knee, letting her headlamp play against the wall. Her slight head motions danced shadows across the exquisite carvings, making the stone seem almost alive. "Look at this Q-Tip shaped object here."

They'd seen the shape several times, and its frequency increased as they drew closer to the Dense Mass. It was round and smooth at both ends with a bar in-between. It reminded her of a plastic hand-held dumbbell, the five-pound kind used during running or aerobics.

"Everywhere we see this shape, it's at the start of a sequence. When we see the dumbbell, the next panel in the sequence shows hundreds of tiny rocktopi. I'm not sure if the size reflects scale, or they represent children. Perhaps even a larval stage smaller than the young ones we first saw. This might be a story of their origin."

"So this is their myth surrounding the creation of their universe?" Sanji asked.

"That's what I think, yes," Veronica replied, showing little emotion in the discovery. None of it thrilled her the way it once had. She felt like a machine, perfunctionatorily analyzing data like some assembly-line worker screwing a nut on a bolt a thousand times a day.

"What do you mean by *the creation of their universe*?" Connell asked.

"Every human society has a primitive myth surrounding the creation of mankind," she said. "Christians, for example, have Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. It's logical that as intelligent creatures, they've invented religions to explain away the mysteries of life, such as the creation of the world."

Connell moved a few feet down the tunnel, staring at another panel. "So if this dumbbell thing is their Garden of Eden, what do you suppose this means?"

Veronica looked at the panel in question. In it, a ring of rocktopi surrounded a large picture of the dumbbell. They looked prone, perhaps dead, deflated like the ones they'd gunned down earlier on the cliff. The message looked rather obvious.

"I think their Garden of Eden may be off limits," Veronica said. "To them it may be evil; cursed, perhaps."

"Why would their birthplace be cursed?" Sanji asked.

"Perhaps the Dense Mass cavern is holy ground they're not supposed to tread on," Veronica said. "I don't know yet."

Connell scanned the carvings. Higher up, almost to the ceiling, he saw something that didn't seem to fit with the rest of the rocktopi religion. "Veronica," Connell said. "Is that a man, wearing what I think he's wearing?"

Veronica looked up, her light joining Connell's on the wall. "That's a man wearing an old-fashioned mining lamp," she said. "The oil kind, like wearing a candle on your head."

Connell scanned the area—the mining-helmet man was the start of a sequence. The pictures that followed showed yet another massacre, a massacre of men and horses.

"Oh my god," Veronica said quietly. "The mass grave on the plateau."

"Jessup," Connell said. "They carved a story about the Jessup mine."

"But that can't be part of a religion," Veronica said. "That doesn't make sense, unless this isn't a religion, but a historical document. I think they—" Her words trailed off as a faint clicking noise filtered to her ears. She looked to her left, back the way they had come—and her breath froze as still as the stone walls. A silverbug clung to the ceiling, watching them like a spider eyeing wayward prey.

She suddenly realized that they were well outside the jammer's range. Once free of the static signals, the silverbugs quickly returned to their original behavior.

"Let's move," Connell said.

Veronica needed no more coaxing. Without another word, she and Sanji trotted nervously down the tunnel. Connell brought up the rear, constantly throwing glances behind him.

8:10 a.m.

Angus and Randy moved forward with a hint of caution, always keeping an eye out for wandering rocktopi. They frequently ran across silverbugs that moved like wasps dying a slow insecticide death. The scrambler jammed the silverbug signals, sending them stumbling into walls and over each other.

The two men stopped simultaneously, not needing to talk. They both peered down the tunnel, concentrating on a tiny spot of faraway light. The spot didn't look like much, but to them it was a beacon, the entrance to the massive cavern surrounding the Dense Mass. They'd be there in less than five minutes.

Angus grew anxious at the others' tardiness. He stooped to plant a tiny motion sensor as Randy pulled the Marco/Polo device from his pack.

"How are they coming?" Angus asked, keeping a wary eye on a silverbug that stumbled awkwardly toward him. Randy punched a few buttons to adjust the screen.

"They're still lagging behind," Randy said, a frown of deep worry scoring his face. "Connell, Veronica, and Sanji are about ten minutes back."

Angus grabbed the staggering silverbug by the leg and casually tossed it down the hall like so much rubbish. "Those fucking gimps are slowing us down."

"Darnit, Angus," Randy said. "They're injured, and pretty bad at that."

Angus looked back up the tunnel, hoping to catch a glimpse of the others. "Cry me a river, Randy. If they don't speed up, we may have to bust out on our own."

"You've got to be kidding!"

"No, I'm not. We can't wait for them and they know the way out. I say we get them to the Dense Mass, show them the Linus Highway and then boogie. They're slowing us down."

Randy squared his shoulders and seemed to puff up with sudden determination. It was an expression that Angus had never seen in his friend, and he immediately disliked it.

"You're not going anywhere," Randy said. "And if you do, it will be without the map equipment. We're getting them all out of here safely."

Anger and disappointment swelled in Angus's heart. Not Randy. Everyone else, sure, but not *him*. Didn't he understand that the others didn't matter? Didn't he understand they were just regular, everyday people, that six billion others just like them wandered the Earth? He and Randy were *different*, they were *geniuses*.

"What the fuck are you talking about, Randy? We're not going to throw our lives away for the likes of *them*. You're coming with me. I'm not going to let you die down here with the gimps."

"You don't have any say in the matter," Randy said. "They are *people*, and we're *going* to get them out."

"Fine, then what about we get out and get help? We can move so much faster than the others."

Randy slowly shook his head. "No way, Angus. I think Connell is right about you. He doesn't trust you to go ahead for help, and now neither do I. I think you only care about yourself, and would forget about anyone else as soon as you hit any danger... including me."

Angus pushed back his fury. Randy was a traitor, pure and simple. And as such, he deserved not a shred of loyalty. Randy stormed off, moving ahead down the tunnel.

Angus followed. They moved to within fifty yards of the entrance to the Dense Mass cavern. Randy looked down a side tunnel that branched off to his right, then stopped so abruptly that Angus nearly stumbled into his back.

"What is it?" Angus asked. "What's the matter?"

Randy said nothing, only pointed down the right-hand tunnel, his face grave with concern and more than a little bit of fear. Angus looked, and felt that same dread melt into him like a hot needle into wax.

Chapter 35

8:15 a.m.

Kayla faced a mild dilemma. The little prick's tracks veered off on a left-hand branch that leveled out from her current position. The Linus Highway, on the other hand, continued unerringly downward toward the Dense Mass.

She wanted to kill him, after all, so she should follow his tracks. The tracks, however, might be old. In the tunnels there was no wind, no weather, nothing to erode the footprints and indicate their age. They were probably days old, made shortly after the helicopter landed a few miles from camp and the Little Fucking Prick and his Butt-Buddy hiked back to the mountain under the cover of night.

She stared at the map, beginning to appreciate the expanse of the complex. *Thousands* of branches. And where would she find the monsters? Angus and Randy might be anywhere. What if they weren't even in the caves at all anymore? She could follow their tracks for days and never lay eyes on them.

The Linus Highway, on the other hand, led straight to the Dense Mass—which was the goal of EarthCore, the goal of Angus and the goal of Connell Kirkland. Out of the thousands of choices that faced her, catching them at the Dense Mass held the best odds for success.

And Angus came in the Linus Highway. Which means he'll more than likely come out the same way. But she couldn't be sure of that—he'd kept one entrance hidden, who knew if there were more? She couldn't afford to wait for him and take the chance he had another way out. She *had* to get him, and get him as soon as fucking possible.

Her new plan was to head to the Dense Mass, see if the Marco/Polo picked anything up, and hopefully find a creature there. She had to find a creature, if nothing else, or she'd never return to her destiny, never return to the NSA.

Kayla moved down the Linus Highway, leaving the Little Prick's prints behind.

8:24 a.m.

Randy stared, mouth agape, nearly in shock. There were so many silverbugs the walls seemed to shimmer with living platinum. Angus and Randy moved forward at an agonizingly slow pace. They watched every step to make sure they didn't tread on one of the scrambled silverbugs, a task made difficult by the vast number of spidery machines. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands, coated the deep alcove, a cluster so thick the wall writhed with their spindly legs, and the air resonated with unending clicks and whirs. Headlamps played off this wiggling platinum wall as Angus and Randy's eyes tried to focus on the mass of metallic bodies.

"What are they doing?" Randy asked in a whisper, his anger toward Angus forgotten in light of the phenomenon.

"I have no idea," Angus said. "It's hard to tell with the scramblers on."

Randy watched the silverbugs swarm like maggots on a week-old dog carcass—there had to be a purpose to such a gathering. The scramblers, of course, negated this purpose, and the silverbugs just ambled meaninglessly on the wall. Some of them grew so confused they simply fell off and clattered heavily on the floor. They rolled on their round backs until their legs reversed themselves, allowing the silverbug to move on just as aimlessly as before.

"Do you think it's dangerous to go in there?" Randy felt the adrenaline pump as his fight-or-flight response subconsciously screamed, yet he—like Angus—never slowed his steady forward pace.

"Probably," Angus said absently, nodding his head and moving forward. "There's got to be a reason for this swarming."

They both stopped ten feet from the alcove's end, a wall covered so deeply with silverbugs it was impossible to see the stone beneath. It reminded Randy of baby wolf spiders clinging thickly to their mother's back.

"If this is the end of the cave, what the heck are they doing?" Randy asked.

Angus turned to Randy, a solemn look on his face.

"There's only one way to find out," he said. He held up the scrambler. "We're never going to know unless we turn it off."

Randy looked at the scrambler, feeling his pulse race even higher. He looked at Angus. They shared a moment of unspoken understanding. They both realized the silverbugs mass could swarm over them instantly. If the machines possessed *any* ability to hurt people, sheer numbers would probably mean a quick and painful death. Despite the threat, they both had to know what these machines were doing.

Randy nodded quickly. Angus switched off the scrambler.

The silverbugs stopped milling aimlessly for a second, every one of them suddenly holding very still, not moving a leg, not making a single noise. The drastic shift from constant noise into total silence scared Randy far worse than the horrible, swarming platinum walls. It was as if the silverbugs were thinking, *recalibrating*, trying to remember their purpose in the world. Then, almost as soon as they'd stopped, the deafening drone of a thousand silverbugs returned full force as the machines burst into motion. The wall writhed with activity, machines moving so fast Randy couldn't focus on a single one for more than a second. A new

sound joined the familiar clicking—the rapid-fire popping, chipping sound of breaking rock.

Angus and Randy stood stock still, feeling silverbugs crawl over their feet and surround their legs. The machines ignored the humans, seemingly too bent on their task to realize interlopers stood tall in their midst.

During the flurry of activity a bare patch opened, small, but enough that they could see the rock beyond the sheet of living platinum. A silverbug wandered onto the patch, long spindly legs carrying him safely across his brethren. It lowered its wedge-shaped head to the stone. The wedge suddenly shot into the wall, breaking off a small, jagged chunk of rock the size of a marble. Tiny, whirling wires whipped from the wedge, lashing over the top of the small rock, pinning it in place. The silverbug turned away from the alcove's end and walked along the wall, carrying its small burden. It moved toward the main tunnel, turned the corner, and disappeared from sight.

Randy stood thoughtless, stunned into silence. Angus didn't move an inch, but his face showed an expression of incredulity. They stared at the scene before them, the final piece of a puzzle clicking home with the weight of a billion-ton cave-in.

"They dug the whole thing," Angus said. "Thousands of years. There's over a thousand square miles of tunnels and caverns. Billions of tons of rock."

"One rock at a time," Randy said, his stunned mind trying to run massive calculations of weight and mass and size. "One little rock at a time."

Angus turned the scrambler back on. The droning static screech filled the cavern—instantly the silverbug's cohesive activity eroded into a massive, meaningless wander. A mass of them fell away from the wall, domino-like, exposing the rock beneath.

A ten-inch by ten-inch panel, filled with faces. Fresh carvings of faces. Lybrand. Mack. Connell. O'Doyle. Veronica Reeves. Sanji Haak. Angus. Randy. That was the first panel. The second panel showed Angus and Randy moving through a tunnel, every last detail of their helmets and KoolSuits etched perfectly into the stone. There were more panels... *blank* panels. But they'd both seen carvings elsewhere in the cave, and they knew what was supposed to come next.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Angus said. Randy nodded violently in agreement.

The two left the alcove much faster than they'd come in.

8:26 a.m.

15,967 feet below the surface

Luckily the rocktopi made a lot of noise, otherwise Connell figured he would already be chopped into tiny pieces. Silverbugs still wandered about aimlessly, clogging the floor, making it difficult to move fast over the already-unsure footing. He'd never seen this many in one place before; they practically covered the ground and fell off the walls and ceiling like flaking paint from a dead house.

Connell chanced a glance over his shoulder.

The apple-rot/dog crap stink billowed through the tunnel like putrid breath from a dying man riddled with Black Death. The rocktopi screeched and filled the air with the rustling hiss of their rough skin on rocks and sand. They flashed angry, violent colors that lit the walls in psychotic discotheque strobes—an image of a blinking Christmas tree shoved into a shit-strewn sewer pipe flared through Connell's mind.

That the silverbugs milled without purpose encouraged him, for it meant Angus and the others were close. He didn't know if he could make it. His knee pumped pain like a geyser and his back screamed with every jolting step. For the third time in the last minute the thought of self-sacrifice blared through his mind. He could turn and fight, hopefully buying Sanji and Veronica time to get away. Veronica's hand grabbed his arm and pulled him forward, as if she heard his thoughts through a blaring stereo.

"Come on, Connell! Don't let these fuckers get us!"

Sanji panted with exhaustion, but called out encouragement in ragged gasps. "We are almost to the Dense Mass cavern. I do not think they will follow us in there. It is our only hope!"

The trio sprinted down the tunnel, looking like skipping children for all the fancy footwork needed to side-step the meandering silverbugs. Connell chanced another glance over his shoulder. The flashing rocktopi were gaining. Only twenty yards and closing fast, their curved platinum knives glistening like the foot-long teeth of some horrid, multi-colored dragon. The rocktopi seemed to have little trouble navigating the mindless mass of silverbugs.

A thrown rock blasted a silverbug off the wall beside Connell, hard enough to smash the platinum body with a shower of sparks. Had the rock found its mark, his brains would have felt the hot cave air. Connell focused his attention and redoubled his efforts. Adrenaline surged, the pain in his leg and back faded away under the rush. A strange thought burned unbidden through his mind.

This is what it feels like to be prey.

"I see it!" Veronica screamed, her voice a combination of total exhaustion and impending victory. "I see the cavern! We're almost there!"

The noise behind him grew louder. It sounded as if the rocktopi were only inches from his back. Fear gripped his body with vise-tightness, fueling his legs, pushing him forward. Rocks smashed into the walls on either side and bounced near his legs, missing his feet by inches. A ham-sized rock clipped his shoulder, nearly throwing him off balance, but he kept going.

Veronica stepped on a round silverbug body and her ankle bent outwards like a snapping branch. She screamed, stumbled, and started to fall. Connell reached down with lightning speed and threw an arm around her waist, pulling her roughly to her feet. She grimaced from the pain but would not quit. She covered the final twenty yards hopping on one foot to keep her balance as Connell carried her along.

Suddenly the darkness of the cave surrendered to the brilliant daytime-like light of the Dense Mass cavern. The image of something impossibly huge appeared before Connell, but he could focus only on taking one more step, one more step, one more step.

Veronica finally lost her balance on a loose rock and fell hard to the ground. Connell tried to catch her again, but only managed to fall himself, hitting the dirt with a *whoof* and a thud. He bounced once, rolled once, then lay on the ground sucking air, his eyes closed tight with terror, unable to rise one more time, too tired to even curl up into a fetal position.

He waited for the cutting to begin.

Chapter 36

8:28 a.m.

16,000 feet below the surface

The blows never came.

Connell opened his eyes, struggled to rise to one elbow and looked back; the rocktopi clustered at the tunnel entrance, a swarming mass of angrily stretching tentacles and sparkling crescent knives. The creatures glowed a steady, soft blue. They didn't follow, nor did they hurl anything his way.

Connell's lungs burned as if the rocktopi blades were already buried in his chest. A sudden spasm gripped his stomach; he rolled to his hands and knees just in time to hurl a puddle of useless bile onto the sand and dirt. He vomited one more time, then his breath came in heaving lungfuls as he tried to rise to his feet. Strong hands gripped under his arms and lifted him effortlessly.

"You okay, boss?" Lybrand asked as she supported Connell's weight.

"Yeah," he said, wiping vomit from his chin. "I'll be okay in a second. Is everyone here?"

"Everyone made it," Lybrand said. She looked back to the entrance where the rocktopi thronged as if held back by invisible bars. "Looks like you got here just ahead of the Christmas rush. Why don't they come in and finish us off?"

"Veronica thinks... this place is... religious," Connell said between deep breaths. "Holy ground or something."

"Doesn't surprise me," Lybrand said. "If this is holy ground, they sure know how to build one motherfucker of a church."

Connell looked at her with confusion, and she merely nodded toward the middle of the massive cavern. Connell followed her gaze.

It was the Dense Mass.

8:42 a.m.

He'd expected the cavern's immense, mind-boggling size. Over five miles long and three miles wide. He'd known those dimensions, been prepared for them. He'd expected the faint sound of rushing water as well. Nothing, however, could prepare him for the vastness that spread before his eyes.

Or what it contained.

Giant. Monstrous. His brain scrambled for words to describe what he saw. It was so big the end of it faded off in the distance, invisible behind a light mist

kicked up by the unseen water. A string of multiple artificial suns, just like the one in the kidney-shaped cavern, ran the length of the five-mile expanse. They illuminated the gargantuan object with a bluish tinge.

The rounded end soared some two thousand feet into the air, hundreds of stories tall, dwarfing any skyscraper ever built. A cylinder—smaller than the rounded end—stretched off down the cavern's distance. It spread on and on, so huge that it faded into the cavern's mists before he could make out the other end. But he knew at the other end sat a massive, rounded end identical to the one reaching up in front of him. He knew what was there because he'd seen the shape before.

The shape in the wall carvings. The thick Q-Tip. The dumbbell. The mystery of the caves, the rocktopi, the silverbugs... everything... suddenly cleared away as if a giant fan blew a shrouding fog free from their minds. The rocktopi's "Garden of Eden" wasn't a myth, wasn't a fable, wasn't primitive religion.

It was true.

And it was accurate.

As unbelievable as it was, the evidence towered in front of him, real and undeniable and massive beyond comprehension. The rocktopi were aliens after all. And their Garden of Eden?

It was the ship that had brought them to Earth thousands of years ago.

Chapter 37

9:25 a.m.

They stuck together, moving as quickly as they could. The Linus Highway lay on the ship's far side. To reach it, they had to hike around the ship, a trip of some four miles to the far end, then another mile and a half back up the other side. The ship sat in the cavern as if a custom-built trench had been dug for its mass. The middle shaft rested on the flat surface, while a large, curving section of the rounded "tip" lay unseen underground. The seemingly perfect fit reminded Connell of the Styrofoam packing surrounding a new stereo or VCR.

As they walked, the water's rumble grew louder. Soon they came upon the same thick river they'd crossed an eternity ago. Either they had crossed over it, or it had crossed under them. Here the river flowed across some kind of granite bedrock, not the limestone that dominated the mountain. Erosion took an obvious toll on the granite, but the water had carved only a shallow trail through the rock as opposed to the massive chasms the river left in limestone.

The river raged into a hull crack that spanned nearly 300 yards. Ancient changes in the river's course had carved trenches in the granite, bends and breaks and turns made and forgotten over the course of millennia. Each course change took a chunk out of the dead ship. The river acted like a slow and steady buzz saw. Each time the river changed course, the grit-filled water slowly ground away more platinum. Clanks and plinks constantly filled the air: the sound of gravel smashing into the edges of the hull, powered by the river's tireless current.

A large section of the thick shaft, undercut by the river, had fallen in upon itself who knows how many millennia ago. The ship's hull arced high up on either side of the 300-yard-wide break. At the top, perhaps 750 feet in the air, the two sides almost met.

Like a cross-section on some architect's drawing, the river's erosion exposed the ravaged hull's interior. Thousands of sphere-shaped rooms packed the interior, making it resemble a slice of extraordinarily holey Swiss cheese. The canyon looked dark and misty, like the Amazon overgrown with an arcing canopy of huge silver trees.

"Angus, why didn't your map show all these rooms inside the Dense Mass?" Connell asked.

Angus shrugged. "The platinum compound is much denser than rock. The GPR couldn't penetrate it, especially near the bottom range."

Connell moved to stand next to Angus. "How much platinum do you think is in this thing?"

"I couldn't begin to calculate it," Angus said as he peered up into the towering ship-canyon. "But it looks like the entire hull is platinum, and logically it's of the same composition as the dust we analyzed. It looks like the hull is very compartmentalized, probably to prevent depressurization in case of an accident—or perhaps in case of battle damage—which means it's not just the exterior hull that's thick platinum, but most or all of the interior walls as well. I'd take a *rough* guess that there's over two million tons of pure platinum here. That's hundreds of time more than all the platinum that's been mined in man's history. At current prices, that's fifty-four *trillion* dollars."

"Let's worry about mining history when we're topside," Lybrand said. "I want to get on the move."

Randy stepped forward, thumbs hooked in his backpack straps. "We can't leave yet," he said. "We have to look around. We have to look inside, see what we can learn."

Angus looked at Randy as if he were dumber than a dry dog turd. "Are you nuts? We need to get out of here. We can look all we want when we come back with some serious firepower."

"I don't think we'll be able to come back," Randy said. "There's a new species down here. A very important species, I'd imagine. Wouldn't you say, Sanji?"

Sanji nodded. "Highly important, yes. And that is an understatement."

Randy continued. "An important species and this is their natural environment. These beings, these *sentient* beings, are hostile. If any humans come down here, they may have to harm the rocktopi."

"No fucking shit, Sherlock," O'Doyle said. He looked very pale, but his eyes still shone with determination. "We'll *harm* them all right. See what happens when I come down here with a trained platoon and the proper equipment."

"That's not what I mean," Randy said. "People won't *let* us harm them. Sanji, what's the scientific community going to say when we tell them what's going on down here?"

Sanji was silent for a moment, as was everyone else. The reality of the situation suddenly began to sink in. Sanji spoke, his voice calm and patient. "They will not let anybody come down here—not for a long time. Especially because the rocktopi

are hostile. People will study this place for years before anyone comes down here, and then it will be some anthropologist who will try to communicate with them. This is proof that we are not alone in the universe, the most important discovery in the history of man."

"Horseshit," Angus said. "We own the place, we'll do with it as we please."

"It will not matter," Sanji said. "There is nothing in the history of science that compares to this. All the top scientists in a dozen different fields will implore the president himself to stop development of this area, and he will do just that."

"The scientists won't be the only ones stopping us," Randy said. "So will the military. The army will have people here on the double, and they'll gather as much knowledge as they can while the government stalls the scientific community. And that's *if* we have a chance to get the news out. If we don't, this place will wind up being little more than a myth, like Roswell."

Angus seemed unwilling to accept the logic. "The government can't say boo if we tell the truth. If we let a few of the right people know about the place and what's really down here, the government can't get away with a cover-up. This is just too big. This is the information age, don't forget, and communication is a wee bit more advanced than the days of Roswell. We can protect ourselves and still keep it quiet from the bleeding-heart scientists. I've got a fucking profit-sharing clause in my contract, and I'm not about to give up a piece of fifty-four trillion!"

"We'd have to go public," O'Doyle said quietly. "We'd have to have all our faces on national news and tell the whole thing."

"Why in the hell would we do that?" Angus asked. "Then we won't be able to mine. People won't stand for it."

"Because if we don't go public we're dead," O'Doyle said. "Randy's correct. The military would do anything to have total control over this place. Anything, including killing all of us."

"That's an exaggeration," Angus said. "Do you expect me to believe that the government goes around killing American citizens to keep secrets, you paranoid bastard?"

O'Doyle's voice sounded dark, ominous. "I know that's exactly what they do. I've done it myself."

The river's roar was the only sound as everyone stared at O'Doyle. Connell knew what the man had done for a living, but it was different to hear it from the horse's mouth.

"So it may be now or never," Randy said, breaking the short silence. "We have to take a look inside, learn all we can right now, because we may never get another chance."

"We may not get a chance to do *anything* if the rocktopi come in here!" Lybrand said. "Don't you people get it? We're fighting for survival, not a paycheck, not the cover of *Scientific American*! We need to get out *now* and evaluate this after we're safely up top. They may not come in here right now, but this is their *holy ground*. Sooner or later they're coming in to get us!"

Connell thought on her words. She was right. No matter what the religious taboo, they couldn't bank their safety on the rocktopi's unpredictable behavior. And what did they know about that religion, anyway? As far as they knew, the rocktopi had a mandatory five-hour waiting period before carving up defilers. He

was about to tell everyone to move out when a distant shout interrupted him. It was Veronica, yelling from some fifty yards away, by the cavern's towering wall.

"Come over here!" she called. "You have to see this. I've figured the bastards out!"

Connell wanted to kick himself for letting her slip away from the group. He hadn't even noticed her walk off—he'd been too preoccupied staring at the impossible ship. What the hell was she thinking? How could she wander away from the group at a desperate time like this?

"She's slipping," O'Doyle said quietly, as if he'd read Connell's mind. "You'd better bring her back and keep close tabs on her, Mr. Kirkland. I've got a bad feeling she's slipping quick."

Connell cupped his hands to his mouth. "Get back here, Veronica! Get back here now!"

"It's their whole story," Veronica yelled back, her voice faint as it filtered toward them over the river's roar. "Come on." She disappeared into what appeared to be an alcove.

"I'll get her," Connell said. "I'll drag her back if I have to, we need to move."

"I... I need a break," O'Doyle said. "My leg is bleeding a little."

Connell looked at O'Doyle's thigh. Spots of blood showed in the KoolSuit material. He'd forgotten just how bad O'Doyle had been cut. The big man sat heavily—he was too tired to stand.

"Twenty minutes," Lybrand said. Her voice sounded low and cold. "Twenty minute break. Then we're going."

"I'm going in that ship," Randy said.

Connell turned on him. "The *fuck* you are! You're staying right here, dammit. I'm going to get Veronica, we'll wait twenty minutes for O'Doyle to rest, then we're going."

"I'm going," Randy said. He looked Connell right in the eye. "And Angus is coming with me."

"I am?" Angus asked.

"You are," Randy said. "Connell, if you think you can stop me, you're welcome to try."

Connell wasn't much better off than O'Doyle, which meant he wasn't in shape to fight another man, even a scrawny guy like Randy. He'd never seen Randy so... confident, determined.

Lybrand checked her watch. "We're leaving at 9:47. Anyone not back here is on their own."

Connell turned and hobbled toward Veronica. Sanji went with him.

Chapter 38

9:28 a.m.

Kayla was motionless, unblinking. She stood in a thin side tunnel, half hidden by a series of thick brown stalagmites. It walked past her with smooth

strides. Was it dangerous? She had no idea. She didn't even know if it could see her. Her hand clutched her Steyr GB-80, the hammer cocked and waiting.

She waited until it was only a few feet away, then flicked the gun toward the thing and pulled the trigger. The bullet slammed into the round body, denting the metal and knocking it against the far wall.

It took a staggering, unsure step. Kayla fired twice more, both bullets knocking huge dents into the body. It stopped walking, instead it sat on the sand, legs twitching spasmodically. Kayla took careful aim and fired once more—this time the bullet punched a neat hole in the body.

The thing stopped moving.

Evidence, Kayla thought. She carefully lifted the thing by one thin leg. She'd never seen anything like it, and knew instantly that the government would drool over such an advanced machine.

But was that *enough*? It was still just a machine. It wasn't intelligent. It wasn't *enough*. Kayla stashed the dented robot behind the brown stalagmites. She'd retrieve it on her way out.

She checked the map—only about forty-five minutes to the Dense Mass. Seeing the coast was clear, she continued down the Linus Highway.

9:31 a.m.

"Not much left besides the walls and dust," Randy said as he worked his way through narrow corridors not designed for human passage. A musty, archaic odor filled the air, the smell of abandoned industrial machines combined with buildings left mildewy and ravaged by floodwaters. River mist drifted lightly inside the ship, collected on the walls and dripped to the floor to collect in little stagnant pools. The dark alien vessel felt dungeon-like and dangerous, as if it might spring to life and swallow them up at any moment.

"This is retarded," Angus said. "Let's head back."

"You don't want to head back and you know it. You're staying with me."

Despite the desperate situation, Randy Wright had never felt so good. He'd stood up to Angus, and because of that they'd rescued the others from the cliff's edge. For the first time in his life, he hadn't backed down; he'd stood up and *fought* for what was right. And then he'd stood up to Mr. Big Shit Connell Kirkland. He'd stood up to *Cutthroat*. Randy wasn't going to be a pushover anymore, he wasn't just going to be a follower.

The corridors were small and round. He was glad he'd left the pack with O'Doyle and Lybrand, near the riverbank just outside the ship—it was nice to walk around unencumbered for a change. An endless expanse of sphere-shaped rooms spilled out before them. Piles of damp dust, the nameless remnants of what might have been furniture, clothes—possibly even the rocktopi themselves—filled every room.

"Look at this," Angus said. Randy rushed over to see the find. Embedded in the wall was an ancient but technical looking device made of platinum and what appeared to be ceramic material. It looked like an isolated modern art sculpture mounted on a mold-covered metal wall. Empty spaces in the device glared with shadows each time their headlamps passed by.

"Man, this has been here a long time," Angus said. "These blue and yellow ceramics apparently don't decay at all. Any plastics or other non-platinum metals are long gone."

"What do you think it was?"

"How the flying fuck would I know?" Angus said with a sneer. He acted like he didn't want to be in the ship, but Randy knew him well. Angus was secretly thankful Randy had pushed for the brief ship exploration. Angus would never say as much, but that was okay.

"Let's pry it off," Angus said. "Maybe we can tell something by the wiring, if there's any left."

At a loss for a better idea, Randy found a loose piece of the heavy platinum/iridium metal and worked it into the edge of the device, where it met the curved wall. Angus did the same. After a few seconds of prying, the device popped free and fell to the floor with a clatter. It landed face-down, the remaining blue and yellow ceramic pieces shattering into a thousand brittle bits and scattering across the floor like scurrying cockroaches.

Angus stared at the blank wall behind where the device had been. The wall was smooth, seamless, just like the rest of the room.

Randy's nose wrinkled in confusion. "No wires?"

"Don't you get it?" Angus said. "This whole ship is one solid piece of platinum, one of the best conductors known. Platinum conducts electrical signals with almost no degeneration."

Randy's eyes widened—suddenly, the ship's construction and materials seemed to make sense. "It's just like the silverbug muscles, no wires needed. The rocktopi sent the signals through the entire ship."

"Yes!" Angus said. "Just like a computer network."

"So the entire ship is the wiring," Randy said. "Their computers send signals that travel through the entire hull, but only the target device reads it."

"It's genius!" Angus said. "Even if the ship takes damage, even if it gets a big hole punched through it, all devices not destroyed will still function. As long as the device remains connected to the hull it can send and receive commands."

"And it's not just the outside hull," Randy said, his eyes gazing across the room's curved walls and ceiling. "Everything inside is platinum too. This ship is so vastly compartmentalized it would practically never depressurize."

"That's a good point. It makes me think this is a warship. Imagine how much damage this beast could take and continue functioning. Every device they have would work until it took a direct hit."

"But how did they weld this all so seamlessly?" Randy asked. "If it's taking damage, hull stress is going to eventually sever the seams and break a lot of contact points for the signal."

"Look at the room we're in, Randy," Angus said patiently. "What does it look like?"

Randy looked around again, not understanding. "It looks like a ball."

Angus leaned forward, as if to give a hint. "Not a ball..."

"A bubble," Randy whispered, suddenly understanding and feeling like a stone-age imbecile compared to the technology that surrounded them. "A bubble. A

bubble made when they cast the hull. This entire ship is a solid piece of platinum with bubbles for rooms and hallways."

The two scientists wandered around the ship in wonderment. Randy kept a close eye on his watch. They had another fourteen minutes before they had to head back.

They splashed through the damp, sewer-like halls, talking loudly and excitedly to each other. They made too much noise to hear the tiny click click click of metal feet that followed them at a discreet distance.

9:34 a.m.

Connell and Sanji entered the alcove to find Veronica staring at the walls. The alcove was almost twenty feet in diameter and some fifteen feet high. Like the Picture Cavern, detailed carvings completely covered the walls.

"Dammit, Veronica," Connell said. "You pull a stunt like that again and you're on your own."

"They were running away," Veronica said, seemingly ignoring Connell's words and attitude.

"Running away from what?" Sanji asked.

"This." Veronica pointed to a carving just to the right of the alcove's narrow entrance. It was a long, narrow, evil-looking shape, bristling with many sharp protuberances and jagged spines. Something of the shape made Connell think of paper wasps, with their thin bodies and dangerous demeanor.

Sanji peered closer. "Is it a spaceship?"

"I think so," Veronica said. "I believe this was their enemy in some ancient war. Follow the line of boxes; it seems rather clear what happened."

Connell's eyes traced the line of square carvings from right to left. The one just to the left of the wasp ship showed three dumbbell shapes; lines shot out from the hulls and arced into two wasp ships, both of which were breaking up into pieces. The next square showed a planet surrounded by wasp ships. In the middle of the planet was a detailed rocktopi. The next square chilled Connell—the planet broke into pieces from a wasp ship attack.

"Their planet was destroyed?"

"I believe so," Veronica said. "It looks like the Garden of Eden out there was part of a navy, but had no home to return to."

"Won the battle but lost the war, eh?"

"So it seems. Too bad the wasp ships didn't get all of the ugly glowing bastards."

The concept cast a sullen mood over all three of them. Destroying the entire planet, leaving a species without a home; it bordered on unthinkable. The rocktopi soldiers were left in their warship; left with nowhere to turn.

"Why did they come here?" Connell asked. "And why didn't they just take over the whole planet?"

"I think that's explained here," Veronica said. Her hand traced more exquisite picture-carvings on the wall until it rested on a square containing hundreds of the wasp ships. Connell could see three dumbbell shapes in the carving's center. It painted a picture of hopelessness, or overwhelming odds.

"They were being hunted," Connell said quietly.

Veronica nodded. "Looks like they were highly outnumbered and were unable to call for help."

"There had to be others in their force, why could they not call for reinforcements?" Sanji asked.

"Maybe they didn't have any reinforcements," Connell said. "And if they called for help the enemy might pick off the signals and track them down. They had to hide. But how did they know to come here, to Earth? I mean it's obvious they can breathe in our atmosphere and survive in our gravity, but how did they find Earth?"

Sanji dropped to one knee, examining the bottom row of the ten-inch by ten-inch carvings. Some showed a flaming star surrounded by planets. Some showed just a planet, other planets and moons. Connell and Veronica followed the bottom row with their eyes; it reached all the way around the alcove and continued halfway around in the next row up. The last carving showed a star surrounded by nine planets. Connected to that carving was a planet with rather familiar-looking continents and a single orbiting moon.

Connell stared at the planet. "They didn't know about Earth. They searched for a new home and found it." The breadth of the rocktopi's search for a home stunned him, left him filled with awe at the magnitude of such a quest.

"My goodness," Sanji said as he counted the squares. "They searched hundreds of star systems and at least thirty planets. How long were they out there?"

"I can't tell," Veronica said. "I think I'm close to understanding their written characters, but since their 'days' and 'years' are probably based on their home planet's rotation they'll be different from ours."

"Well they had to translate to Earth time at some point, didn't they? Some system that measures day and nights?" Connell asked.

"Why would they? They're always underground. The weather never changes, day and night remain constant. They could have any timekeeping system they wanted."

Connell wondered in awe how long might it have taken them to find Earth. "They could have been out there for thousands of years. The entire culture would have to be self-contained. Entire generations might have been born, lived, and died before the ship reached a suitable planet."

"Maybe that *was* their culture," Sanji said. "A class of their society that lives and dies on-ship. Perhaps entire generations that never see their home during a voyage."

Connell nodded, seeing how neatly the elements seemed to fit the bizarre situation. "Maybe that's why they ran. If they already had a self-contained society, then all they really had to do is find a place to land, right?"

"And that's what they did in this series of carvings," Sanji said, his hands trailing across another line of boxes. "I think this will look strangely familiar to you, Roni."

Veronica and Connell looked at the frame. The Wah Wah Mountains' outline graced the carving's bottom edge. A large, rectangular chunk of the mountain range floated in the air, leaving a gaping hole. Underneath the floating mountain, half inside the hole, apparently descending, was the dumbbell ship.

"That's what the big rectangle was," Veronica said in a cold, flat voice. "They didn't dig a trench, they lifted the entire fucking mountain and set the ship inside."

Connell didn't like the sound of her voice. She seemed unfazed by the elaborate display of history before her, somehow distant, as if she wanted to solve the puzzle merely because it was there, by rote mechanics rather than heartfelt curiosity. He wondered if O'Doyle was right, if she was "slipping," as he called it.

"We're guessing they came here more than ten thousand years ago," Veronica said. "Human civilization was still in the infant stage. There was no technology. And there were very, very few people in this area. They could have easily taken over all of North America without even trying, and the rest of the world as well. They could have wiped out humanity and taken over the Earth for themselves."

"Perhaps they cannot live on the surface," Sanji said. "They seem to thrive in temperatures too great for human comfort—perhaps where *we* are comfortable it is too cold for them. I imagine an Earthly winter might kill them. Winter would entail a 170-degree drop in temperature for them, arguably comparable to us trying to survive in an environment where daily temperatures reach a hundred degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale."

"Besides," Connell said, "the enemy was still out there. The rocktopi didn't care about conquering, Veronica. They cared about *surviving*. They wanted to hide from this enemy. That's why they buried themselves so deep and left no trace on the surface. That's why they bury all remains of anything they attack—they don't want any evidence, not even a shred, that they're here. Even if their enemy came to Earth, they might not find the rocktopi."

"So the rocktopi started over," Sanji said. "What happened then?"

"There are two more alcoves right next to this one," Veronica said. "Maybe the story is there."

They moved into the next alcove.

Chapter 39

9:36 a.m.

Lybrand watched as O'Doyle twisted in a fitful sleep. Sweat poured from his head. Many of the blisters on his face had broken open; pus oozed out of them, thick and glistening under the artificial light. She constantly dipped her hand into the shallow pool of water at the river's edge and gently rubbed it across his face. She didn't know if it did any good. The water was a touch cooler than the oven-like air, and it seemed to slow his sweating, so she continued.

O'Doyle was dying. She had to get him out of here, get him to a hospital if he was to live. They'd run out of painkillers long ago, and antibiotics as well. She didn't dare touch his KoolSuit to check the wounds for fear she'd rip Angus's shoddy repair job. If that happened, O'Doyle's temperature would soar and he'd die. The heat and pain were taking their toll on her big man. Her impossibly tough, impossibly brave man.

"Hold on, Patrick," she whispered. "Hold on just a little longer and we'll be out of here."

Watching O'Doyle, she failed to see two spidery metallic shapes silently emerge from the ship, moving toward her along the riverbank sand.

9:40 a.m.

Randy followed Angus into yet another room of dust, pieces of glass, ceramics, and little else. "This thing's been here forever and a day. There's really nothing left but the platinum hull."

"That's the other reason they made their platinum-iridium compound," Angus said, "it doesn't corrode. This hull will be here forever, until the damn tectonic plate this mountain rests on slides back into the mantle. This hull is a masterpiece of engineering."

Randy thought about the hull's complexity, the intricacy of the metals involved, and the alloy's strength. Nature had never come up with anything so strong, so resistant, so perfect for space travel. Guilt suddenly swept over him, overwhelming his mind with one blaring thought—how could they have missed it?

"Angus, we should have seen this in the lab."

Angus gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "Oh don't worry about it. We were getting ready for the spelunk. We would have found this easily if we'd looked for it."

"That's the point, Angus," Randy said. "We were getting ready for the dig, we *weren't* doing our jobs."

"So what?"

"So we could have seen the platinum was artificial. It's blatantly obvious. Connell would have handled things completely different."

"Big deal. It's all water under the bridge now."

Randy felt anger explode in him like an atom bomb. He'd followed Angus every step of the way—Mack's death and any other deaths that might occur were as much due to his negligence as Angus's. He grabbed Angus by the shoulders and slammed him into the curved wall. Angus's eyes grew wide with surprise and, perhaps, fear.

"Don't you get it?" Randy said. "We're all in danger of losing our lives! Mack is *dead*! And it's all happening because we were too busy trying to get famous and not paying attention to our jobs. We should have seen this immediately!"

"Oh, so you want me to feel guilty for all this?" Angus said, pushing Randy away. "Fuck that, you bleeding heart. Fuck *that*, and fuck *you*. Everyone knew the risks. This isn't our fault."

Randy had never wanted to punch someone so bad in all his life. Angus simply *didn't care* about anyone or anything other than himself. "Yes, it is our fault. We're responsible because we didn't do our jobs."

"Hey, *you* be responsible if you want to. I've got a clear conscience. If they all weren't so stupid, they could've figured things out for themselves."

Randy started to rebut, but the words froze in his mouth when a flash of silver from the hallway caught his eye.

"Angus," Randy said quietly. "Did you turn the scrambler off?"

"Of course not," Angus said. "It's on, you can hear it, can't you?"

Randy realized the crackling hiss filled the room. He'd been listening to it for so long his brain had tuned it out. "Did you change the frequency?"

"Don't be a dumbass, Randy. What is it? What's wrong?"

"I think we're in a lot of trouble," Randy said. "Turn to your left very slowly."

Angus turned. There, on the curved wall, perched an impossibly shiny silverbug. Their headlamps blazed off its polished shell and off its perfect, unmarred legs. It wasn't until that moment that Randy realized how pitted, scratched and dented all the other silverbugs were, as if they'd suffered a thousand years of tiny scrapes, nicks, and bumps.

This one was brand-new.

It wasn't milling about aimlessly. It sat on the wall, its wedge-shaped head looking right at them.

"The scrambler doesn't affect it," Angus said, his voice a hissing whisper. "How could they change their frequency?"

"They didn't change it. They made a new one with a new frequency, to get around our scrambling." Terror crept up Randy's legs and into his groin. They were deep in the alien vessel, and suddenly the equation had changed: they were no longer invisible to the silverbug's murderous stares.

"*Who* made a new one?" Angus asked. "The rocktopi are primitives! How the hell did they know to change the frequency? Who the hell is making these things?"

The silverbug shifted on the wall. A ringing, metallic scraping sound filled the hall as a nasty-looking, six-inch-long jagged blade slid out of the wedge-shaped head.

The sound of the blade faded slowly, until only the scrambler's useless crackle filled the room. Angus and Randy stood motionless and terrified, unsure of what to do, unsure of what to think.

"Now they've got soldiers to go along with the workers," Randy said. "Nobody is making them, Angus. They're a collective. They're building themselves."

The silverbug made no motion. It waited and watched. As still as the wall itself. As still as death.

Chapter 40

9:43 a.m.

Looks like they keep track of Earth time after all," Veronica muttered, staring at the carvings inside the second alcove. "Whoopeedoo, aren't they clever?"

Connell wanted to get her out of there. Maybe back on the surface she'd snap out of this strange funk.

She vacantly stared at a series of three large carvings, so big they dominated ten square feet of the curved wall. The first showed the Sun and the familiar nine rings of the planets that orbited around it. The second showed an outline of the Wah Wah Mountains and a pattern of stars behind it. One chiseled star looked much larger than the rest, and seemed to nestle between two peaks. The last

showed a map of the tunnels, highly detailed down to two tiny rocktopi climbing up a long, straight ascending shaft.

Connell recognized the shaft immediately. "The Linus Highway," he said.

"Bingo," Veronica said absently. "Give the man a prize."

"Is that the North Star?" Sanji asked, peering intently.

"Bingo-bingo," Veronica said. "Two prizes for the price of one ticket. It appears to be the summer solstice. Our little uglies dug astronomy. Looks like they make the trip to the surface once a year."

"What for?" Sanji asked.

"Maybe keep a lookout for their enemy, maybe scout the stars for a rescue ship, maybe see if we'd put up a Burger King yet," Veronica said. "Why does a dog lick its balls? Because it can."

Her lips started moving with no sound—Connell realized she was counting, staring at a series of dots chiseled under the large carvings. To the right of the dots were rows of the strange rocktopi writing.

A quick count showed the neat dots were 144 columns wide and 79 rows deep. Connell started counting up the last incomplete row.

"Ninety-five," Sanji said, seeming to read Connell's mind and beat him to the punch. "For a total of 11,327 dots. One for each year they've made that trip to the surface?"

"Bingo-bingo-bingo," Veronica said.

"Oh my goodness," Sanji said quietly. "Look at how some of these characters to the right of the dots repeat. These are their numbers, Roni! See the pattern? I think they count in base-twelve instead of the base-ten system that we use."

As Veronica and Sanji set to work cracking the rocktopi numeric symbols, a distinctive mark on the detailed tunnel map caught Connell's eye. He recognized the dumbbell-shaped ship—from its bottom stretched a long vertical line. Hanging over the top of the tunnel, deep inside the ship, appeared to be a large spherical object. Unlike Angus's map, this rendition had no bottom-range limit. Connell eyeballed the carving, comparing the size of the ship with the shaft. He estimated the shaft's depth at over twenty miles. At the shaft's bottom, a series of caverns radiated outward in a circle. The caverns looked to be filled with thin pillars. While small in scale, the carving gave the impression that the pillars supported the massive weight of the mountain, the caves, the ship, even the very ground he stood on.

Below the picture of the shaft, all the way down to the floor, was a series of carvings. The first showed the sphere and what looked like a rectangular console. The second frame showed the sphere dropping into the shaft's depths. The third appeared to illustrate an explosion, an explosion that destroyed the thin supporting pillars, shattering them like brittle crystal candlestick holders. The fourth frame showed the ship and the tunnel complex tumbling in on itself, collapsing under its own weight. The last frame in the series illustrated some kind of flood. Liquid filled the tunnel and rocktopi appeared to be bursting into flames.

"Sanji," Connell said breathlessly. "Come take a look at this."

Sanji stared for a moment, then his eyes widened with surprise. "Oh my goodness," he said, his voice filled with sudden dread. "They will do anything to avoid their enemy."

"What do you mean?" Veronica asked, her eyes squinting in concentration. "They're going to flood the tunnel with water?"

"Not water," Connell said. "Magma. They would drop that sphere down that tunnel. It would detonate somewhere near the mantle. Everything we've been in, everything we're standing on, the ship... everything... would cave in and then fill with magma."

"That's impossible," Veronica said. "Look at how deep that must be. We're already over three miles down; there's no way they could dig that deep."

"Judging by what we've seen so far, the Old Rocktopi knew what they were doing," Connell said. "I can't imagine they'd paint such a picture unless it were true."

"A doomsday device," Sanji said. "But why?"

"Because they only understand death," Veronica said, her eyes glassy and unfocused. "Their culture is military. They'd die before admitting a final defeat. See that first frame? That looks like a control console or something—they left instructions for their descendants, instructions on how to blow up the whole mountain and the rocktopi race along with it."

"There is no way such a device would work after all this time," Sanji said, standing and stretching. "I do not think anything has worked down here for thousands of years."

Connell checked his watch; they still had three minutes before they had to head back. He looked up—Veronica was already heading for the next alcove. Connell followed her, intent on cutting the little jaunt a few minutes short and getting her the hell out of there.

9:45 a.m.

O'Doyle awoke instantly courtesy of a sharp slap to the face. Before he'd even sat up he reached for his knife, only to find it gone. He blinked twice, seeing that Lybrand had slapped him. Her stare focused outward, away from him, away from the towering ship. She was rock-still in a half crouch, black hair hanging limply in her face, eyes hawklike and focused. Her knife pointed toward the threat.

He scrambled to his feet as fast as his tortured body would allow, wincing from the agony that rippled through his leg like a blender on *puree*. Even though she held the knife, he instinctively stood a few feet in front of her.

Two silverbugs flashed impossibly bright with mirrorlike reflections of the artificial suns burning high above. They crouched in the sand at the water's edge. O'Doyle instantly recognized the newness of the machines, just as his trained mind already sought for a way to deal with the six-inch-long saw-toothed blades that protruded menacingly from the wedge-shaped heads.

"Our little friends are adapting," O'Doyle said quietly. "Put the knife away. It won't do any good against them and you'll need both hands if they attack."

Lybrand slowly and wordlessly put the K-Bar into her belt sheath. "What do we do?"

"Reach down slowly and grab the biggest rock you can," O'Doyle said. He stooped, grimacing, and sank his fingers into the sand to wrap around a rock the

size of his head. Lybrand bent slowly and came up with a smaller stone. "On the count of three. You take the one on the left, I'll get the other. One... two... three!"

He launched the heavy rock. It seemed to hang in the air; with a blur of movement the silverbug scurried clear before the rock smashed into the sand. O'Doyle's eyes widened with surprise at the silverbug's blinding speed—it was probably twice as fast as any he'd yet seen.

Lybrand's silverbug also sprinted away from O'Doyle's throw, then stopped on a dime and stood statue-still. She whipped her arm in a back-swing circle, releasing her rock in practiced softball-pitcher style. The silverbug moved, but not fast enough—the rock smashed into its legs, tearing one of them clean off and bending another. The wounded silverbug jerked and writhed. The severed leg squirmed spasmodically in the sand with a sudden life of its own.

The uninjured silverbug blurred forward impossibly fast and launched itself toward Lybrand's head. She brought her hands up in a defensive posture, catching the long-legged machine in mid-air. The blade flashed. Two fingers on her left hand fell to the ground as if they'd never really been attached at all.

She screamed in pain and fear. Two of the silverbug's multi-jointed legs wrapped firmly around her arms. The other two flashed forward and grabbed her head—pulling her eye straight toward the knife's bloody tip. She turned her head at the last second: the blade skimmed across her forehead, cutting her from the left eyebrow across the center of her left ear. The top of her ear fell uselessly into the sand as blood gushed down her face and chest. In a half-second the blade pulled back for another attempt at her eye.

Suddenly O'Doyle's strong hands grabbed the ball-shaped body. He ripped it upwards with all his strength. It clung to Lybrand, sharp claws ripping through her KoolSuit sleeves and into the tender skin below as O'Doyle yanked the machine away. Arcing spurts of blood trailed from the silverbug's split-foot claws.

O'Doyle roared with primitive rage as he used both hands and all his strength to slam the machine onto a rock. It smashed into the stone with a satisfying metallic crunch. The legs squirmed as they reversed themselves, sharp claws suddenly digging into his forearms. He bellowed as he lifted it up and slammed it down again and again and again like Thor smashing his hammer downward with all his fury. O'Doyle heard something break inside the dented shell. The legs quivered once, then fell limp.

He looked toward the other silverbug, his eyes wide with psychotic fury, his body pulsing with adrenaline, hate and rage. The wounded machine tried in vain to scurry away on two good legs. It looked like half a crab crawling across a dark-sand beach. Fury fueled his body. He hopped toward the wounded silverbug, covering the ground with three strong thrusts of his good leg.

Grabbing the silverbug by one thin, struggling limb, he swung it in a blurring arc and brought it smashing down on a large boulder. The shell split, spilling sparks on the riverbank. The thick smell of burned chocolate wafted through the air. O'Doyle bellowed at the crushed silverbug, a primal scream of victory and rage. He blinked a few times and looked at the squirming leg still clutched in his hand. It flexed spasmodically. He dropped the leg and hopped back to Lybrand.

Her good right hand covered the mauled left, unable to stop the blood that spurted forth from the stumps, blood that spilled onto the damp sand in bright red

droplets. The sleeves of her tattered KoolSuit dangled from her forearms like wet noodles coated in spaghetti sauce. Sheets of blood rolled down the side of her face, matting her black hair to her skin. She'd rolled on her side while writhing in pain—sand stuck to her blood-drenched skin.

"Hold on, I'm here."

Lybrand's eyes alternately pinched tightly shut and stared with wide-eyed disbelief at the fingers laying lifeless on the sand.

O'Doyle grabbed the knife from her belt and slashed at one of the backpacks, cutting off two long strips of nylon fabric. He pulled her good hand free and pinned it to the ground under his knee. She cried in pain as he forcefully grabbed her ravaged limb. He twisted so he could pinch her forearm between his right arm and body, leaving only the hand exposed. "Hold still, soldier. This is going to hurt."

"Do it!" Lybrand said through teeth clenched. O'Doyle wrapped a strip of fabric around the stump of her trigger finger, tied a knot and then pulled it tight with a strong, sharp snap. Lybrand threw her head back let loose a short scream of pain, instinctively trying to pull away from O'Doyle.

"Shut up!" O'Doyle said. "Stay quiet! There may be more silverbugs out there, so don't make a noise no matter how much it hurts."

Lybrand bit her lip and looked at him through her right eye, her left shut against the flow of blood cascading down her face. He expertly wrapped the second strip and snapped it tight. Lybrand gave a long grunt of pain, but kept her mouth shut.

O'Doyle ravaged the pack, trying to find something suitable as a head bandage. He slashed a bedroll, pulled out the cotton padding and pressed it to her head, instructing her to hold it in place.

Lybrand reached up and awkwardly pressed the cotton to her temple. O'Doyle cut another long swath of pack material and tied it tightly around her head. He then turned his attention to her arms. A chill filled his soul. The sleeves of the KoolSuit were shredded. The clear, viscous fluid coolant dripped along with her blood into the sand. Deep lacerations covered her arms.

He shredded two more strips of pack material; if he didn't stop the fluid loss, her body would suffer temperatures teetering on the boiling point in a matter of seconds. He could worry about blood poisoning later; the heat, combined with her wounds, would kill her much faster. As quickly and carefully as he could, he laid the KoolSuit shreds back in place, then tightly wrapped the long strips around her arms and tied them off. Within twenty seconds, both forearms were bandaged from elbow to hand.

"I'm... glad you're a... soldier," Lybrand grimaced through clenched teeth.

"Why's that?" O'Doyle asked softly, wiping the blood-matted hair from her face.

"Because you'd make a really shitty doctor."

O'Doyle looked into the ship-canyon, but saw no sign of Angus or Randy. He looked back the way Connell had gone, but saw no sign of him either. He needed Angus to patch up the KoolSuit. O'Doyle knew his battlefield repair would slow the coolant fluid loss, but wouldn't stop it. Without Angus, Lybrand would be dead inside an hour. He checked his watch, then set his eyes to scan the cavern, looking for more silvery movement. Twenty minutes was up. Everyone should be back already. But he saw no one.

No one at all.

9:48 a.m.

Angus stared at the statue-like silverbug still clinging to the wall. It hadn't moved five agonizing minutes. If he hadn't known it wasn't there when he entered the room, Angus would have thought the machine an immobile wall fixture, a piece of sculpture, perhaps.

The machines were adapting to the situation. He'd seen the rocktopi's intelligence, leaving only one logical answer; the silverbugs were more than a collective program, they were a collective *intelligence*. A thinking, plotting, adapting intelligence hell-bent on killing everyone in sight.

"We've got to do something, Angus," Randy said. "We can't just stand here. If the silverbugs can ignore the scrambling they might be leading rocktopi against the others. We've got to jump it."

"Are you nuts? Look at that knife!"

"We can't stay here, dammit!" There was only one exit to the room; the silverbug sat just outside it like a prison guard.

"Think of something, Angus," Randy said. "Get us out of here."

Angus took a deep breath. "Okay, okay. You're in front of the door, so you move toward it. If it moves away, great, we boogie on out of here. If it goes for you, I'll grab it."

Randy nodded slowly. Angus heard his friend swallow, and heard his breathing speed up. Angus's own breath came in short gasps. He felt his body surge with adrenaline, anxiety and fear.

"You ready?" Randy asked tentatively.

"Do it," Angus said.

Randy took one small step forward.

With the strong spring of new legs, the silverbug launched itself off the wall and into the room. Randy yelled in surprise. He brought his hands up quickly and caught two of the silverbug's outstretched arms.

"Angus, get him!" Randy screamed, his face filled with terror at the wriggling, heavy *thing* trying to slash at his face.

Angus remained motionless, only his head turning so his eyes could follow the action. His feet felt cemented to the floor, his body felt cold and immobile, as if he were part of the round walls. He couldn't move. He just *couldn't*.

The silverbug's two free arms slashed at Randy like the back legs of a fighting alley cat. Sharp claws sliced through Randy's KoolSuit, through his skin, splattering blood on the dusty floor. In the light of Angus's headlamp the blood looked black.

Randy screamed with pain and threw the silverbug at the wall. Quick as a cat it reversed its legs, all four claws landing firmly on the curved platinum surface. It sprang off the wall like a bouncing rubber ball, coming straight back at Randy.

"Angus!" was all Randy had time to say before the silverbug slammed into him again.

Angus watched the heavy robot crash into Randy's flailing, bloody arms, staggering the small man back. The silverbug landed on the floor and instantly

bounced toward Randy's head, this time knocking him to the ground. Like a metallic wolf spider the silverbug quickly crawled up Randy's body. He brought an arm up to push the machine away.

"Jesus Christ get it off!"

Randy squirmed under the silverbug's spindly weight, the attack fixed in Angus's headlamp glare like a big-tent spectacle.

A hand, severed at the wrist and suddenly free of its connection to the arm, flew across the room, flinging streaks of black blood as it spun through the air. It landed with a small bounce at Angus's feet. Angus's breaths came in short, rapid-fire gulps of air. He looked down at the hand, Randy's fight for life suddenly left in darkness. The fingers on the hand flexed lightly, curling inward like the legs of a dying beetle.

Angus's feet suddenly came free of their moorings. He sprinted down the hall, toward the others, leaving Randy's last gurgling, horrified death-screams echoing through the curved halls behind him.

Chapter 41

9:51 a.m.

The Marco/Polo unit beeped only once. She quickly pulled it from her belt, but before she could even look at the screen the signal was gone. Kayla played with the settings... nothing. She put the unit back into her belt.

It didn't matter.

One beep was enough. She was right; they were down there. Down there in the Dense Mass. The map told her she was very close, possibly only a few minutes away. A small, crooked smile crossed her lips.

9:52 a.m.

The third alcove didn't do them much good. It appeared to be a history of leadership—thousands of brightly colored individual rocktopi carvings covered the walls. Each was crafted with the megarealistic care that defined the race's art, and each looked as if it could jump off the wall at any moment.

"Hey, look at this," Veronica said from across the alcove. "These carvings remind me of those dying rocktopi squirming around after the battle. Who says there's no beauty in their art?"

Connell walked over and stared at the detailed carvings. The artist, probably dead before human civilization ever began, had sculpted details of an alien culture with such skill that even another species could clearly identify rocktopi in the throes of agony. While less than an inch high, each of the rocktopi seemed to vibrate and shudder, captured in a limestone freeze-frame of death. There were hundreds of them. He took a step back, letting his cone of light widen. Some light from the Dense Mass cavern filtered in through the alcove entrance, but only the headlamps let them see proper detail. Dying rocktopi covered the wall.

"What do you think this means, Roni?" Sanji asked.

"Got me, but I wish we could talk the bastards into a repeat performance," Veronica said.

"This explains quite a lot, I think," Sanji said, bouncing his finger along the symbols on the wall, like a second grader doing rudimentary arithmetic. "I think this was a plague or disease of some sort. About fifty-eight hundred years ago, if we have their number system correct."

Veronica studied a small, two-frame section of the carving. The first frame showed a living rocktopi with a number on the right-hand side, the second showed an obviously dead rocktopi, also with a number on the right-hand side. "It looks like they lost... twenty-four thousand... three-hundred... and five."

Sanji gasped. "That many died?"

"Looks like about six thousand lived," Veronica said.

"So they had thirty thousand rocktopi down here?" Connell asked. "There's no way there could be that many."

"Look again at that ship outside, Connell," Sanji said. "It would hold thirty thousand with ease. And this tunnel system could accommodate ten times that number. What is significant here is that they lost eighty percent of their population. That could explain why they're so primitive. Who knows how much of the leadership and knowledge died in the plague."

"So what?" Connell asked. "Surely if they can move mountains they have computers that store all their knowledge."

"Yes, but you are thinking short term," Sanji said. "When the plague hit, we estimate they had already been down here for over six *thousand* years. How long can any computer last, even one from an incredibly advanced civilization? Surely things break down eventually."

"Nothing lasts that long," Veronica said. "What do you think would happen to America if all of the computers stopped working, you had no means to replace them, and then you lost eighty percent of the population, eighty percent of the knowledge? And it looks like its taboo to enter the ship—where the vast majority of their technology was probably kept. They instantly went from a sophisticated, technological culture to a subsistence existence."

She crouched near the bottom of the curved wall. "Their computers may have shut down, but their little robots were working overtime. Take a look at this."

The carvings showed hundreds of dead rocktopi in one square. The next showed a silverbug, its legs seeming to pull together a pair of smaller rocktopi, and the frame after that illustrated the young rocktopi entwined together in an indefinable mass of tentacles. The last frame showed dozens of tiny rocktopi babies frolicking around the deflated corpses of the former lovers.

"What do you think it means?" Connell asked.

"I think," Sanji said with reverence, "that the silverbugs matched up rocktopi resistant to the disease."

"You mean they *bred* them?" Connell asked. "Like cattle? They're fucking machines! How could they *breed* intelligent creatures?"

"*Formerly* intelligent," Veronica said. "They might as well *be* cattle now."

"Such a disaster would devastate their gene pool," Sanji said. "They apparently breed in pairs, like us, so we can assume genetic crossover determines their traits."

With only six thousand individuals, recessive traits would show very quickly. This explains why they're so barbaric—they have *regressed* to a primitive state due to thousands of years of inbreeding."

Connell checked his watch. They were six minutes late—he'd gotten lost in discovery and forgot to track the time.

"We're going, and right now," Connell said. He grabbed both the professors by the arm and pulled them away from the wall. Sanji resisted slightly while Veronica came limply along with all the emotion of a stuffed doll.

Sanji protested. "We need to see more of this!"

Connell pulled them out of the alcove. "We need to get back to the others and get out of here alive. We have to go."

They quickly left of the alcove, Sanji's strong legs supporting Veronica's bum ankle.

9:54 a.m.

Angus walked out of the ship canyon and into the bright light of the artificial suns. He saw O'Doyle crouched over a prone Lybrand. She had clumsy, bloodstained bandages wrapped around her head and forearms.

Dammit, Angus thought. *I don't have time for this shit.*

Upon seeing Angus coming, O'Doyle hopped up on his good foot. "Thank God you're back. Lybrand's hurt and her KoolSuit is damaged. There are new silverbugs, with knives attached—"

"I know," Angus interrupted. "I saw. One of them got Randy."

"He's dead? You're sure?"

"I'm sure," Angus said. "Believe me, Randy's dead."

"I'm sorry," O'Doyle said. "They almost got Lybrand. Come here, I need you to patch up her suit."

"We already cut up all the gloves. There's nothing left to patch it up with."

O'Doyle's eyes narrowed. "You'll find something." His voice was thick with threat. "You'll come up with something fast or she'll be wearing your KoolSuit, understand?"

Angus swallowed hard and nodded. O'Doyle was badly hurt, limping around on his one leg. Angus didn't delude himself—O'Doyle could kill in a heartbeat. He had to get out of there. He couldn't outfight this Cro-Magnon, but he could outthink him. Angus scanned the area, finding little but dirt and rocks, the ship, and the river.

"Okay," Angus said, trying to reassure O'Doyle with a smile. "Just relax, big guy. I'll come up with something. I'm a genius, remember?"

"Just do it quickly. She's running out of coolant."

Angus moved to his pack, which had been shredded by O'Doyle's knife. He set the scrambler down and started rummaging through the pack's contents. "I'm sure I've got something in here," he said loudly, making a production of digging through the meager supplies. The truth was he had nothing. KoolSuits couldn't be jury-rigged, they had to be repaired with the proper ducting material. Without a good patch, the tiny ducts would continue to bleed coolant until none remained.

Without the coolant, Lybrand would soon suffer the consequences of the intense geothermal heat that permeated the caves.

"Here's something," Angus said. "Tell her to hold tight." He had something all right. He had the computer map, and he had a vacuum-packed flotation device. The device weighed less than four ounces, but when he pulled the seal air would rush into the spongy material and fill millions of tiny chambers. Within a few seconds after pulling the seal, the floater could support the weight of a two-hundred-pound man. He glanced up at O'Doyle, who stood only a few feet away, hand on the hilt of the knife stuck in his belt.

"Oh no!" Angus said, looking away from the ship and past O'Doyle. "More silverbugs!"

O'Doyle turned to face the new threat, but nothing was there. He turned back, knife out in a flash, eyes wide with fury, but it was already too late.

Angus used the brief distraction to sprint for the river, tucking the map computer under his arm and pulling the flotation device's seal as he ran. O'Doyle started to limp after him, but Angus reached the bank in only a few seconds and launched himself into the roiling water. The current grabbed him and rocketed him downstream, into the deep shadows of the towering ship-cavern.

Chapter 42

9:55 a.m.

Where the fuck have you been!" O'Doyle said, veins popping out of his head, neck muscles thick with tension. "You were supposed to be here seven minutes ago!"

Connell felt the waves of anger pouring off O'Doyle like late-afternoon heat rising from the desert floor. The man's huge, tightly balled fists looked like medieval maces ready to crush a skull or two.

"We got tied up," Connell said softly. "What's the matter?"

"Lybrand's hurt, and that motherfucker Angus took off!"

Veronica and Sanji glanced over at Lybrand, who lay passed out in the sand, a bloody mess covered in bandages. They immediately ran to her and started checking her wounds.

"He just left," O'Doyle said through gritted teeth. "Down the river."

"Where's Randy?"

"Angus told me he's dead."

Connell's heart sank at the words. Another EarthCore member gone. "Did you see him?" Connell asked. "Where is his body?"

"It's in the ship somewhere. I haven't seen anything, and I don't really give a fuck. We need to worry about Lybrand."

Connell spoke slowly. "Veronica and Sanji will help her. We're getting out of here right now."

"Why weren't you back on time?" O'Doyle asked, sounding as if a sad little boy was using the voice of a huge man. "You could have stopped Angus. You could have made him help her."

"I know," Connell said. "I swear to you—we're going to get her out of here."

Emotions swarmed over Connell. Murderous anger for Angus's chickenshit actions along with overwhelming guilt. Another of his people dead, one more lay dying. He couldn't go in the ship after Randy. Even if he wasn't dead, Connell couldn't leave the party, and they couldn't wait any longer.

"Connell," Sanji said. "I think we have another problem."

Silverbugs skittered about like a swarm of platinum crabs. They seemed to come out of nowhere. Within seconds they'd formed lines so thick one could walk on them and never touch the ground. The lines ran at an angle away from the ship, stretching far off toward the cavern's side wall perhaps a quarter-mile away and then disappearing into a narrow fissure.

Trying to remain calm, Connell walked to Randy's discarded web belt and searched through the multitude of pockets. He pulled out a small pair of binoculars and through them looked out at the fissure.

Rocktopi thronged inside the narrow crack, a hyperkinetic blob of alien terror. They looked more agitated than ever, a bubbling mass of flashing colors and flinging tentacles, more like a wall of animated flesh rather than sentient beings. The silverbugs bounced madly, faster than he'd ever seen before, as if they were desperate for the rocktopi to break the religious taboo and pour into the cavern, destroying everything in their path.

"The silverbugs are trying to draw the rocktopi in here," Connell said. He suddenly noticed the absence of the scrambler's scratchy static. He walked over to the packs, eyes hunting. "They look pretty pissed. Veronica, do you think they'll attack?"

"They're caught between religious tenets," Veronica said. "They appear to be forbidden to enter this cavern, but following silverbug commands is ingrained in their culture. I think they're coming in, it's just a question of when."

Connell's heart leapt with hope as he finally set eyes on the scrambler amidst one of the pack's scattered contents. Angus must have set it down before his cowardly dash to the river. Connell picked it up and switched it on. He'd never thought static could sound so beautiful. The thick lines of silverbugs immediately broke down into a confused exodus, like cockroaches scrambling to escape a sudden light.

Sanji ran over to Connell and O'Doyle. "Lybrand is badly hurt," he said. "We must get her out of here now. Her temperature is rising."

Connell's mind raced, stress filling him from head to toe. So many wounded, and they still had to hike around the ship just to get to the Linus Highway. Lybrand would never make the trip. They had to get her out and fast. Time was up in more ways than one. But how? How could they get out fast enough? Connell's eyes drifted toward the rocketing river.

There was really only one way.

BOOK VI

Exodus.

Chapter 43

9:58 a.m.

Angus washed up on a sharp bend deep inside the ship, a wall made of finely fitted limestone blocks. The wall redirected the river back down the bend. Some of the blocks looked badly eroded, while others looked new, as if they were replaced when the water did too much damage. A light coating of platinum dust covered the blocks, sparkling lightly.

As he looked about, he wondered when the nightmare would end. Light from far above filtered past the edge of the thousand-foot-high cracked hull. River mist filled the air, freezing the light in a perpetual, wafting fog.

He didn't care about the platinum dust. All he cared about were the silverbugs. Thousands of them.

Clinging to the walls and wriggling on the floor, like the inside of a beehive or an anthill. Angus noted with relief that these silverbugs were all a little scratched, a little beat-up, a little dingy. No new ones here.

He sat at the edge of a dome-shaped, cathedral-like structure complete with its own softly glowing light. Erosion had long ago collapsed the dome's outside edge, exposing the interior view to the river. That same erosion had probably forced the rocktopi—or more likely, the silverbugs—to build the breakwater. A level stone floor reached away from the wall and into the dome.

In the dome's center, fifty feet from the breakwater and dangling like a low-hanging chandelier, hung a large, polished orb, about ten feet in diameter and poised over a large hole. Angus remembered his map and the strange line that ran from the ship's center deep into the Earth, far deeper than his sensitive instruments could read. Puzzle pieces clicked in his brain, clicked home with force. The orb could only be one thing, really.

A nuke.

And it looked like a big one at that. A nuke, of course, was his best guess. The rocktopi technology could have anything hanging there, but logic dictated it to be a bomb of some sort. Another mile down and the temperature would exceed the boiling point—no life could exist there.

Movement on the orb caught his eye. A silverbug scurried across its curved reflective surface. The silverbug stopped and opened a panel, revealing a small chamber. Even from this distance, Angus could see the silverbug's "head" wasn't the familiar wedge-shape, but a trio of tiny cable-arms, waving like grass in the

wind. It instantly reminded him of the three-fingered rocktopi tentacle tips. The cables dipped into the chamber, moved about, then pulled out as the silverbug shut the panel and crawled out of sight around the orb's far side.

"Maintenance," Angus said in awe. "That's what these fucking things did originally—maintenance."

A small *click-click* of metal on stone interrupted his observations. He turned his head slowly to the right; a pair of silverbugs with wiggling tentacle heads sat less than ten feet away. They just perched there, observing, probably communicating with others. Angus sat stock-still, suddenly realizing that he'd left the jammer back on the beach, back by O'Doyle.

Tiny splashing sounds came from his left.

He turned, horrified to see another pair of silverbugs moving swiftly through the shallows toward him. Their round bodies, while heavy, were apparently airtight. The silverbugs floated like bobbers while their legs moved stiff and steady like oars on a slave galleon.

Angus pushed off the wall, holding the flotation device to his chest as he back-kicked into the current. The silverbugs followed, moving with surprising swiftness through the water. Angus kicked harder, the silverbugs closed in like slow-motion piranha. Finally they turned back, just as the river's strong current began to pull at him and drag him away, out of the ship.

The rest of the ship whizzed by, blurred by water splashing up from barely submerged chunks of hull. The dimness of the canyon-like breach suddenly gave way to the full blinding light of the artificial suns. Angus kicked desperately, fighting for the far shore. He fought against the tugging current and soon waded into the shallows, exhausted, drained, but smiling with success. On the far side of the ship the sparkling platinum dust was so thick it was like mud—his feet sank in up to his ankles as he victoriously walked out of the water.

There it was. Clear as day the entrance to the Linus Highway sat invitingly only twenty yards from where he stood. He tossed the flotation device aside and stumbled forward.

Almost home—only a little climb now stood between him and the likelihood of a massive rescue team. Angus Kool sprinted to the Linus Highway and ascended, headed for the surface.

10:05 a.m.

The Marco/Polo unit beeped softly. The green, illuminated display's black letters clearly spelled the approach of an EarthCore employee.

Angus Kool.

Fifty yards away.

Kayla smiled.

10:06 a.m.

Angus heard movement up ahead. He stopped, frozen like a terrified rabbit. He listened for the rustling of dead leaves, but heard none. Nor did he hear

the click-click of silverbug feet. He'd left the party far behind, so who could be in front of him?

A rescue party.

A woman's voice called out. "Doctor Kool? Doctor Kool, are you there?"

"I'm here!"

The woman's footsteps came faster, closer.

"Hold on, Doctor," the woman's voice called. "I'm coming for you."

Seconds later the light of her headlamp filled the tunnel. She strode into view, a nasty-looking machine gun held in front of her.

Web gear covered a yellow EarthCore KoolSuit smeared with dirt and soot. Dirty blond hair spilled out from beneath an EarthCore mining helmet. A pair of night-vision goggles hung around her neck.

"Doctor Kool, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Angus said. Rescuers—he felt immensely relieved. He was going to make it out after all. "Who are you?"

"EarthCore sent me," the woman said with a smile. "We're here to get you all out. Where are the others?"

"The rocktopi killed them. We have to get out of here right away." Angus didn't care if his lie was soon discovered, as long as he made it to the surface before O'Doyle came hopping up the Linus Highway.

"Rocktopi? You mean those tentacled monsters?"

Angus nodded impatiently. "Yes, and there's more back there, now let's go."

"Hold on," Kayla said, yanking on his arm to keep him from running up the tunnel. "I'm here to get everyone out. Don't you want to get the others?"

"Are you fucking deaf?" Angus said. He *needed* to get out. He could almost *feel* O'Doyle lumbering up the tunnel toward him. "I said they are dead. Now you obviously know who I am and my position with EarthCore, so I am *ordering* you to take me to the surface right now!"

Kayla cocked her head slightly to the side, irritation clear on her face.

She was so fast Angus never saw the butt end of the Galil before it smashed into his mouth, knocking his left incisor across the tunnel floor, fracturing his cheekbone, and dropping him unconscious to the ground.

10:07 a.m.

The party prepared to tackle the river, hoping to take it through the ship to the Linus Highway waiting beyond. Lybrand's condition grew steadily worse. Connell watched O'Doyle—the big man still looked like death warmed over, but he called forth some reserve of strength and took charge.

Randy's pack bore a flotation device identical to Angus's. O'Doyle pulled the tab and lashed the swelling floater to Lybrand's chest, just under her chin, so she'd stay afloat even if she passed out. When he finished, O'Doyle tied everyone together with long pieces of rope.

"What if I get tangled up in this?" Veronica asked, her voice thick with tension as she stared at the monstrous river.

"That's a chance we have to take," O'Doyle said. "The water's rough and we don't have much time. If you're not tied, and you can't get to the bank after we pass

through the ship, the river will carry you away and we'll have no way of going after you."

Veronica nodded glumly. Connell couldn't blame her. He didn't much like the idea of a nylon rope around his chest while fighting that demonic, black river. They had plenty of slack, about twenty feet between each person.

The big man gave instructions, pointing to the rough map Mack once used to guide them through the tunnels. Angus's magic computer map was either with the cowardly little genius or clutched in the dead hands of Randy, somewhere deep inside the ship. Either way, they weren't getting it back.

"The river takes a sharp bend in the middle of the ship," he said. "We'll stay on the near side in the shallows until we get there, then when we come off the bend we'll start kicking hard for the far shore."

The sound of a hundred simultaneous screeches tore at the air like the battle-cry of a demon army. All heads snapped toward the distant fissure. Even from far off, they could make out a wave of rocktopi, a flashing blitzkrieg of alien anger chewing up the distance at a frightful pace. The rocktopi charged with singleminded abandon. Light from their flashing bodies looked dim under the artificial suns' glare, but the meaning of the murderous oranges and reds was all too evident.

The party erupted in rushed activity as hands raced to tie off ropes. Connell stuffed the scrambler into his waterproof backpack. He cinched the knot around his chest and stepped out into the shallows, looking with trepidation at the river's billowing current.

O'Doyle quickly checked the rope holding the floatation device on Lybrand's chest, then pulled her into the water.

They were tied in a chain, Connell to Veronica, Veronica to Lybrand, Lybrand to O'Doyle and O'Doyle to Sanji. Veronica splashed into the water, panic etched on her face as the rocktopi closed to within a hundred yards. Their screeching filled the air, fighting for auditory dominance against the river's ceaseless growl and the steady plinking of current-driven rocks smashing against the ancient platinum hull.

Some of the rocktopi stopped and scooped at the ground. Heavy, thunking splashes plunked on the river's surface as the limestone aerial assault began.

Sanji cinched off his rope and dashed for the river. O'Doyle and the others swam out toward the current, feeling it pull and suck at their bodies. Sanji's feet splashed through the shallows.

He almost made it.

A lucky, arcing shot caught him: a softball-sized rock slammed into the side of his head. He teetered like a wobbling bowling pin, then fell face-first into the river with a heavy splash.

The rocktopi warriors, more than two hundred strong, moved to within sixty yards.

"Sanji!" Veronica screamed. She fought the current's edge, swimming toward him. Connell stopped her, pulling back until the current took them both. The rope went taught, Connell and Veronica's weight pulling Lybrand's floating body further into the water. The three of them dangled like dead branches at a river's edge, the

swift water kicking up about their faces. Rock peppered the surface as the sprinting rocktopi closed to within fifty yards.

O'Doyle pulled against the rope and the river's current, fighting to reach Sanji, who lay face down in the water, his fat body floating limply in the shallows. A fist-sized rock smashed into O'Doyle's right arm, spinning him around. He lost his one-legged balance and fell into the water. The swift current pulled him ten feet downstream until the rope that connected he and Sanji snapped taut.

Sanji remained face-down in the water, unmoving.

Connell stared at the onrushing mass of screeching rocktopi, now within twenty-five yards and moving impossibly fast. "O'Doyle, let's go!" He kicked hard, pulling Veronica farther into the current.

"We can't leave him!" she screamed at Connell.

O'Doyle looked up at the rocktopi, his face filled with anguish, then back at Lybrand and Connell and the hysterical Veronica. Another rock thudded off his broad chest. The crew dangled at the rope's edge, held in place as if Sanji were a human anchor. The first of the rocktopi splashed into the shallows, moving forward with lightning quickness. Rocks splashed about O'Doyle like machine-gun fire.

He pulled his knife.

"No!" Veronica screamed, trying to pull away from Connell.

Connell pulled hard on the rope, yanking her back. "He has to—or we all die!"

O'Doyle cut Sanji's rope.

The current seemed to rejoice in the sudden freedom from the anchor, catapulting them downstream. Rocks ripped the water like stone rain. Connell chanced one look back as he fought the raging current, and recoiled in horror.

Sanji's head lifted, and he took a deep, gasping breath.

It was his last.

The rocktopi swarmed on Sanji's body, platinum knives flying through the air along with his blood.

The greedy river sucked Connell and the others into the ship's shadows, and within seconds the butchers were left behind, out of sight.

Chapter 44

10:10 a.m.

Hands roughly shook his body. Angus slowly opened his eyes. Shooting pains bounced through his head, a pinball game of agony. He wasn't sure if he had any teeth left. His face felt numb and swollen. He couldn't feel his tongue. He lay facedown. He tried to rise, but his hands wouldn't move from behind his back. The digging sting of thin wire held his arms in place.

"Mphmh," Angus said. He couldn't see what she'd stuffed in his mouth, but whatever it was made it nearly impossible to breathe. It tasted like rubber.

"Well, the little fucking prick is awake," the woman said. "Now we can get cracking."

"Mpphmm." His eyes were now wide open, watching her open and close a rust-speckled pair of pliers.

"Hush, darling," she said, a loving smile on her face. "Don't bother talking till I take the ball-gag out of your mouth."

Open and close.

Angus watched the pliers carefully, noting the wear on the stainless steel handle, the nutcracker-like notches just inside the business end.

"Now I'm going to remove the ball and ask you a few questions," she said sweetly, brushing a wild lock of bright red hair away from Angus's sweaty, dirty face. "You're not going to make a sound, except to quietly answer those questions. Nod if you understand."

Open and close.

Angus nodded once, eyes never leaving the pliers.

"Good. Now we're going to make this quick. Unfortunately, I don't have the proper amount of time to spend with you. I'd love to get to know you better, buddy boy, believe me. You've caused me a lot of grief in the past few days. Do you know what I used to do for a living?"

Open and close.

Angus shook his head no.

"I used to torture people." Her tone remained soft, almost loving. "I did a few other things, too, but my main job was interrogation. And I'm good at it, buddy boy. Believe me. So if you make any noise, it's going to get rough on you. Understand?"

Open and close.

Angus nodded violently.

"Good." She stroked his hair. "You're a smart man, Angus Kool, the smartest I've ever met. However, as smart as you are, I want to make sure you've got all the data you need to make a decision. That's what you scientists need, isn't it? Lots and lots of data?"

Open and close.

Angus picked up her gist immediately and shook his head violently no.

"Oh, sure you do." She stood and walked behind him, out of his line of sight. He pulled against the bonds with a desperate panic, but the wire only dug deeper into his wrists. He tried kicking, but found his feet bound firmly as well.

He felt a knee on his back, pressing into his spine.

"You need lots of data, buddy boy. Enough data to keep me out of the NSA. That's what you want, isn't it? You want to keep me out of the NSA? Isn't that right, you *little fucking prick*?"

Angus felt her hands on his gloved fingers. He tried to fight, to make a fist, but it was too late. She cranked hard on his index finger, straightening it toward the back of his hand, almost breaking it.

He felt the cool steel of the pliers close around the first knuckle of his finger.

"Mpphh! Mmmhph!"

The pliers crunched down. He screamed and screamed, but little could be heard around the ball-gag.

10:12 a.m.

The party clung to the breakwater at the river's bend. All of them stared into the dome, stared at the large, reflective orb hanging from the center.

"Oh my God," Connell said. "It's still here."

Veronica floated in the water at the wall's edge, clinging to her silverbug bobber. Fatigue sapped her, both physically and mentally, the strain of sleepless hours and the anguish of Sanji's brutal death filling her with a dark spirit. She'd raged against Connell and O'Doyle as she floated down the churning, pounding river, so weak she could barely keep her head above water. They'd cut Sanji loose, left him to die. Her mind churned with pumping thoughts of violent revenge against the two, how she could get them for their cowardice.

But those thoughts faded before she'd even reached the river's bend. If O'Doyle hadn't cut the rope, they'd all be dead, not just Sanji. Victims of the bloodthirsty aliens who'd long since outlived any purpose in the cosmos. Thoughts of revenge against Connell and O'Doyle quickly faded. They weren't to blame anyway.

The rocktopi were.

And the silverbugs.

She floated weakly in the water, her hair hanging limp and wet around her face, staring at the instrument of revenge dangling like a giant Christmas ornament over a shaft that ran straight to the depths of hell. Hell. That was where she'd send the rocktopi and their vicious little machines. Straight to hell.

"Connell, there're silverbugs all over the place," O'Doyle said. "Get the damn scrambler out."

"Screw that," Connell said. "Let's just go! Let's get the hell out of here."

"I need a rest, Connell," O'Doyle said gravely.

Veronica tore her eyes away from the orb and looked at O'Doyle. One thick arm held Lybrand's head, making sure her face stayed above the surface. She hung limply; the float tied to her chest the only thing keeping her from sinking.

"Yeah, Connell," Veronica said quietly, just loud enough to be heard over the river's metallic, plinking echo. "I need a rest too."

Connell swam to the wall and pulled himself up. Platinum flakes clung to his hands and his body, to any part of him that touched the dust-covered wall. Silverbugs converged toward him, coming across the damp ground, scrambling down from their perches inside the arced roof above the giant orb. Veronica heard small splashes, and was stunned to see silverbugs skittering like water beetles across the surface at the river's edge. An angry chorus of clicks and whirs filled the air.

Connell fumbled with his beltpack, pulled out the scrambler and snapped it on.

Almost instantly, the silverbugs' coordinated movement collapsed into a jumble of wandering confusion. The current caught one and sent it washing downstream, lost in the frothy rapids.

Veronica swam to the wall and pulled herself up. She and Connell helped pull Lybrand up onto the wall, then helped O'Doyle. Veronica looked at her companions, all exhausted, all wounded, all doomed. She knew, now, that none of them would make it out alive. Too many rocktopi, too many injuries, too far to travel. They were all going to die.

Just like Sanji.

Just like Randy.
Just like Mack.
Just like Jansson.
Just like Fritz.
Just like Lashon.

Veronica wouldn't let it be for nothing. She stood and walked into the chamber toward the dangling orb, eyes focused and blazing with hatred. She absently tried to untie her rope as she walked.

Connell rushed toward her. "Veronica, I don't think we should move away from the water." He grabbed her shoulder. She shrugged his hand away.

"It doesn't matter, Connell," she said, her eyes scanning the chamber, looking for what she knew had to be waiting. There. She saw the control panel, the same one illustrated on the alcove carving.

"Why doesn't it matter, Veronica?" Connell asked gently. He obviously didn't have the faintest idea of how his voice sounded odd, as if he were patiently talking to a child.

"It doesn't matter because I'm not going in the water again," Veronica said without looking at him. "I'm staying here."

"What do you mean you're staying here?" Connell matched her steps toward the large, spotless control panel. The rope that tied them together dragged limply behind. "We're almost out of here."

She stopped, turned, and looked into his eyes.

"I've got to do it," she said. "I've got to destroy them. Them and all of this. It doesn't belong here, can't you understand that? They're not a part of this reality."

"You're upset," he said. "And understandably so. But Sanji's gone, and you can't sacrifice yourself. It won't bring him back. Besides, how could you figure all of this out?"

"I'm smart, remember? Cover of *National Geographic* and all that. Little ol' thing like a ten-thousand-year-old alien bomb shouldn't faze me a bit."

Connell grabbed her fiercely by the shoulders. "No! No way! I've had enough people die in this godforsaken place, and I won't allow another to be killed. You're coming with us!"

His fingers dug painfully into her shoulders. She knew he meant it. He would take her by force, if necessary, back into the river. He was injured, but still much stronger than her. There was no way she could stop him from dragging her into the water.

"Okay," she said quietly, hanging her head. "I... I don't know what I was saying. I don't want to stay here."

"Goddamn right you don't!" Connell said, pulling her back toward the water by one arm. "O'Doyle, your rest is over, we've got to go."

"Yes sir, boss," O'Doyle said, gently slipping Lybrand back into the water and following her in. "Check your ropes—this is where the river gets rough and we have to swim across."

Connell firmly pushed Veronica toward the water. She bent down at the wall's edge and slipped in with a small splash. He switched off the scrambler and stuffed it into his beltpack, then jumped in. The silverbugs suffered a collective shiver, then returned to their coordinated activity.

"Ready?" Connell asked. Veronica and O'Doyle nodded.

They pushed toward the river's center.

Veronica chanced a look back over her shoulder. The silverbugs wandered across the orb's polished surface, keeping it perpetually prepared to fulfill its role. Over ten thousand years they'd been down here, under this mountain, older than any human civilization, older than any human religion. How long would they continue to exist? A poisoned, dying race, barely hanging on to intelligence, barely above the level of animals, kept alive only by their caring machines.

How long?

Weakness filled Veronica—it was all just too much. The current started to tug at her exhausted body.

"Connell," she said softly, then closed her eyes and stopped moving. She slipped below the surface.

Chapter 45

10:15 a.m.

Veronica!" Connell thrashed about madly, searching for any sign of her. He couldn't see her under the murky black water.

"Pull on your rope!" O'Doyle yelled. "The rope!"

Connell suddenly remembered the rope tied about his chest, the other end tied around Veronica. He pulled it while fighting to stay afloat. Like reeling in a dead fish, her motionless body broke the surface once and then again sank below. Connell dove toward her.

The current's edge tugged at both of them, sending them gently downstream. He swam with powerful strokes, ignoring his body's pain and fatigue. He reached her sinking body in seconds, grabbed her limp form and started pulling her toward the surface.

Suddenly she came alive with violent motion, pulling him under. Instinct kicked in and Connell pumped toward the surface, momentarily forgetting that he'd been trying to save her. She grabbed at his waist, pulling him down again. Air bubbles escaped his lips. His eyes widened with panic.

He felt a hand at the small of his back as his head broke the surface. The current tugged firmly at him, pulling him toward the center of the river. He felt his rope snap tight, then relax slightly as his weight pulled Veronica downstream. Where was she? He felt the rope start to bob tight again, then suddenly all tension disappeared. The rope floated limply to the surface.

Veronica's head surfaced upstream and she loudly gasped for air. She swam clumsily toward the shore, his knife in one of her hands, his backpack in the other.

"Veronica, come back!" Connell struggled with all his might against the current, which hungrily tried to suck him downstream. He kept pumping, kept kicking, and felt the current ease up as he closed on the shallows.

A sudden jerk around his waist yanked him back. His muscles screamed in exhaustion as O'Doyle and Lybrand's weight pulled him downstream.

"O'Doyle, help me!"

"I can't! The current's got us!"

Connell fought to reach Veronica, who stumbled onto the shallows one hundred yards downstream from the orb. It was a battle he couldn't win. O'Doyle's weight pulled him into the current's strength, and they shot downstream like a speedboat. He managed one last look back before he turned his attention to surviving the deadly river.

Already tiny and far away, Veronica waved good-bye.

10:16 a.m.

"Well, buddy boy, I think we're finished," Kayla said with an air of satisfaction. There were only five people left, they had no guns, and they were coming her way. Angus had told her everything.

The Dense Mass was an alien ship. The aliens? They were the monsters that had attacked the camp and slaughtered the EarthCore people. The monsters, he called them "rocktopi," were in the tunnels, but they wouldn't go near the ship, and they wouldn't go into the Dense Mass cavern. She knew he was telling the truth—when Kayla Meyers finished her work, they all told the truth.

Tears streaked Angus's face and snot bubbled out his nose. Quiet whimpers revealed the shearing pain of his broken knuckles. He still lay on his stomach, hands and feet tied behind him, eyes and cheeks shimmering with wetness.

Kayla stooped and kissed his forehead, then fastened the ball-gag straps around his head. The dirty rubber filled his mouth with an acrid taste, covering his tongue with sandy grit. He coughed violently, desperately trying to clear his nose, splattering snot on the cave floor. He sucked in a ragged breath, eyes wide with panic.

"I'll be back soon," Kayla said hooking the Galil strap over her shoulder like any other woman would sling a purse. "I need to get all the information I can about this place, and you're so damn smart, I think you're just the man to help me. You and I can have a nice long talk as soon as I nail the others."

Kayla switched off her headlamp and walked down the tunnel, leaving him in the pitch-black darkness. Helpless and terrified. Shuddering, he listened for the *click click* of a knife-wielding silverbug—he knew it couldn't be far away.

10:15 a.m.

Connell dragged his weary body onto the rocks and fell flat, the river's ripples licking his prone form. O'Doyle and Lybrand lay immobile, half in and half out of the water. They'd made it across. He had to go back for Veronica; she was crazy and needed help. But first he had to rest, just for a moment. His heaving chest was the only body part that moved. He'd never been this tired. Never. If he made it to the surface he'd sleep for a month.

Centuries of erosion had exposed a small, bubble-shaped room just at the hull's far edge, probably only a few feet from the Linus Highway. Changes in the river's course had filled the room with sand and rocks. The ground shimmered with platinum dust so thick it might have been freshly fallen snow.

Deep footprints in that platinum dust showed where someone had come ashore. Angus.

Ignoring the pain, the all-powerful fatigue, Connell struggled to his feet and stumbled toward O'Doyle.

"Get up," Connell said between gasps of air. "Let's get her in that little room, then we can catch our breath."

O'Doyle nodded. The two of them barely managed to drag Lybrand the fifteen feet into the small spherical room's shadows before they collapsed.

"I'm sorry about Dr. Reeves," O'Doyle said, compassion clear in his eyes. "Sometimes people just crack under pressure. There's nothing you can do about it."

"She may be nuts, but she knows what she wants to do, and that's what's got me scared," Connell said. "Remember that big dangling orb we saw at the breakwater?" O'Doyle nodded. "Well, that's some kind of massive self-destruct mechanism. I think she's planning on blowing the whole place up. If it's still working, it will wipe out the whole mountain."

O'Doyle stared back with eyes that could no longer be surprised by bad news. "Fuck a duck," he said, then dropped his head to the ground.

They lay still for several minutes, then Connell lifted his heavy head and looked at O'Doyle and Lybrand. Lybrand was still alive. For how much longer, Connell didn't know. She probably should have died in the river. It seemed unfair, somehow, that O'Doyle bring her this far only to see her die so close to the surface. There was no way she could make it; her KoolSuit was out of coolant; the greedy water had washed away the last traces of the life-insuring fluid.

He felt deeply for O'Doyle. Memories of Cori's sudden, horrid death in the car accident filtered into his brain. He missed her, wished she was there now, wished he could just give up, roll over and die and be with her again. But he couldn't give up—lives still depended on him. O'Doyle. Lybrand. Veronica.

Veronica.

She was back there, in the belly of this incomprehensible ship, this ancient relic of a dead race. She was back there, trying to blow it all up. She was crazy, perhaps pushed over the edge by Sanji's death—she needed his help.

Connell gazed upstream, back into the ship's deep, misty, jungle-esque shadows. He'd have to walk upstream to reach her. Walk upstream, way past the cathedral room, then try and cross the savage river again, cross to her side, to the orb. Had she started the detonation process yet? Was she smart enough to figure it out, if it even worked at all? Crazy or no, Connell had no doubt Dr. Veronica Reeves could activate the device. He had to get to her, and fast.

What he had to do, and what reality would allow, however, were two different things. He'd barely survived crossing the river this time; he had doubts he'd live through another attempt. The rocktopi were back there, and the silverbugs. Veronica had the scrambler—without it, the silverbugs would track Connell down and the rocktopi would come a-running. A heroic picture of him traveling back into the dangerous ship and rescuing Veronica was farcical. Reality? Reality painted a different picture. If he went in there to get her, to try and bring her out, he was as good as dead.

He sat up and looked over at O'Doyle and Lybrand. They were both so brave, so strong. They'd fought hard to protect everybody. They were warriors—if someone chose to stay behind, that wasn't their concern. Both of them would continue pushing for the surface.

But there was really only one way Lybrand could survive.

Connell fingered the collar of his KoolSuit. It was tattered and cut in places, but it still worked. It would be enough to get Lybrand to the surface, maybe enough to save her life.

If anyone could make it out, it was O'Doyle and Lybrand. In spite of their injuries, they had something to live for. Connell didn't. Not really. Only an empty career. Useless money that bought him nothing. He'd never even bothered with a will. His time had come and gone; O'Doyle and Lybrand's time was only beginning.

He was going back, going after Veronica, but he was doing it without a KoolSuit. He silently started to pull the form-fitting material from his body.

Beeeeep.

Connell's eyes snapped up and looked around, wondering if he'd imagined the noise. Then he heard it again, a faint beep. O'Doyle pulled his knife and hobbled to his feet. Connell waved him back into the small bubble-shaped room. Connell moved toward the edge of the ship-canyon. He lowered himself to the ground and peered around the edge of the exterior hull.

Less than seventy-five yards away, standing as casual as you please and fiddling with the controls of what looked like a Marco/Polo unit, stood Kayla Meyers.

10:17 a.m.

Kayla watched the Marco Polo receiver. Three signals, flickering on and off, just as she'd seen with Angus's signal before it finally gave a strong reading.

Connell Kirkland. Patrick O'Doyle. Bertha Lybrand.

The big ship had to cause some interference—as soon as those three came out of the ship, she'd have a strong lock. She needed to kill Lybrand and O'Doyle right off the bat. O'Doyle was the clear threat, but Lybrand was also dangerous.

Connell was nothing to worry about—he would be the one to give Kayla more information. She'd always wondered how he would handle the pliers. If she played her cards right, she'd get a chance to find out.

Kayla stood quietly, and waited for the signals to clear.

10:18 a.m.

Veronica clutched the scrambler tightly, its static resonating off the orb room's cathedralesque ceiling. Her body ached. She felt as if she'd dragged the weight of the world a thousand miles. Confused silverbugs fell from the orb's curved, polished shell. Some hit the ground while others dropped noiselessly into the shaft. The jittering machines wandered aimlessly, their minds scrambled by Angus's hotwired radio.

The domed room was immaculate. Her eyes struggled to find a single speck of sand or dirt other than what she herself had tracked in. Every piece of machinery

gleamed with newness, as if it hadn't seen a day of the eleven thousand years it sat waiting for the rocktopi's genocidal enemy, waiting for doomsday. That enemy was nowhere to be seen, but she was ready to usher doomsday in with a warm welcome.

None of this *belonged* here. Not the rocktopi, not the silverbugs, not the ship. These tunnels and all they contained were nothing but death. The rocktopi race truly died out countless millennia ago in a planetary holocaust, unknown light-years away. This group, this Wah Wah Tribe, escaped that holocaust, but such escape was fleeting. They couldn't survive. Not enough material in the gene pool. Sanji had said so, or said something like that, anyway. Now it was time for the Wah Wah Tribe to join their ancestors. She was promoting the species from the endangered list straight through to extinction. Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200.

She reached the control panel, recognizing it from the alcove carvings. Doubts filled her—it looked menacingly complex, but how complex could it be? The Old Rocktopi had set up everything so their descendants could survive in simplicity: the silverbugs did all the farming and all the maintenance; laws and religions were carved into the walls; pictoglyphs were prepared in case the written language faded away among a shrinking, diseased gene pool.

She imagined how it happened. The first thousand years probably went by fine, the rocktopi living happily in their new home, teaching their children history, language, technology, possibly even the arts. Perhaps the second and possibly third millennia slipped by in peace and comfort. Then things—inevitably—broke down.

Any technology, no matter how advanced, couldn't last forever. Slowly stockpiles of parts eroded into nothing, until finally pieces of complex machines couldn't be replaced. To be sure the advanced rocktopi found ways around the problem, but more millennia passed and machines simply stopped working. Only a handful in the beginning, a few minor systems here and there, but enough to start a cascading effect, a chain reaction that over thousands of years shut down their entire system.

Rocktopi children grew up knowing of nothing *but* the caverns. Stories of spacefaring and a distant home planet faded into legend as computers and educational tools broke down into useless junk. Much of the Earth's history was already forgotten, after all; even large amounts of American history had slipped through time's cracks. America was a mere 235 years old. How much could be remembered after eleven *thousand* years?

The Old Rocktopi must have seen their society's gradual erosion; perhaps they even predicted it. The last of the technological knowledge may have poured into converting the silverbugs, making slave machines that could farm, that could dig underground cities, that could scout, that could maintain simple programs in their memory and keep the rocktopi alive.

At one time the silverbugs were no more than servant machines catering to the rocktopi's every need. Thousands of years passed, countless generations, and gradually the silverbugs became part of the environment, as common as air or the stone walls of the rocktopi's tiny universe. Eventually, perhaps *hundreds* of generations after the plague, the rocktopi's intellect faded away. Wracked by

ignorance and genetic deterioration, they regressed to little more than savages, kept alive only by the silverbugs.

The servants became the keepers.

She looked at the control panel in a new light: it was the only piece of machinery they'd seen since arriving, except for the artificial suns. Priorities. The silverbugs were programmed with priorities, instructed to keep the most important machines functioning at the expense of all else. How important was an educational computer if the artificial suns ceased functioning and no food could be grown? The suns were an obvious first priority, and by appearances the doomsday device ran a close second. Whatever that mysterious enemy was capable of, death was far more desirable.

And if such a death was an ultimate priority for the race, then the Old Rocktopi must have provided for its use. She doubted the silverbugs were programmed to destroy their masters, no matter what the situation. Most likely, the orb had to be set off by a rocktopi.

If death was preferable to the enemy and if the orb had been kept functional for this long, then the Old Rocktopi intended its eventual use—which meant there had to be simple instructions. It was only logical. The Old Rocktopi had, after all, predicted the collapse of language, which explained the simplistic messages carved in the Picture Cavern and throughout the tunnel complex. That meant that the orb's instructions were likely as simple.

She looked over the control panel. Several glassy squares sat blank; she assumed them to be video screens of some sort. It was doubtful they could still function. The control panel's polished surface gleamed at her with its hidden knowledge.

The answer had to be here, but where?

Chapter 46

10:20 a.m.

Connell sat motionless in his hiding place. He stared out at Kayla Meyers, trying to figure out just what the hell she was doing there. Logic checked his initial urge to call out to her; she shouldn't be in the tunnels at all. He was the only one from EarthCore who had worked with Kayla. No one else in the company even knew of her, and he'd never informed her of the Wah Wah location.

He knew better than anyone that she was capable of anything. Suspicion filled him, as did fear. She was wearing a KoolSuit. He wondered if she'd stolen it, or killed someone to get it. Web gear thick with ammo magazines and equipment covered her chest. She held a machine gun he didn't recognize. A frown crossed Kayla's face as she fiddled with the Marco/Polo controls. She turned slightly, sweeping the area in front of her with the device. Connell realized that she was either using that device to rescue people—or using it to hunt them down. She shook the device, then looked around at the massive ship, at the cavern walls, at the ceiling, her frown turning to tangible anger. She stuffed the Marco/Polo unit in

her belt and pulled out another gadget. Connell squinted, trying to see what she was doing. After a few seconds, he recognized the device; a chill went through his body.

She held Angus's map screen.

There was only one way she could possess the map computer—by forcibly taking it from Angus. The little bastard would never give it to her, except, perhaps, at gunpoint. Kayla was here on business, business of her own making, business definitely not in the best interest of EarthCore or its surviving employees.

He quietly slipped his head back into the bubble-room, indicating with a finger to his lips for O'Doyle to stay quiet.

"More rocktopi out there?" Lybrand asked wearily, her voice a husky whisper.

Connell was surprised to see her conscious. She looked weak and pale, like cooked spaghetti left lying in the sink. "Worse," Connell said in a hushed voice. "An ex-NSA agent named Kayla Meyers. I think she may have killed Angus."

"I like her already," O'Doyle said.

"I don't know what she's doing here, but she's very dangerous. If she killed Angus, she'd kill all of us in a heartbeat."

"Why would she want to kill us?" O'Doyle asked.

"I have no idea." Connell didn't know what she wanted, but he did know one thing—whatever her game, Kayla Meyers played for keeps.

10:23 a.m.

It was almost like looking at one of those three-dimensional pictures, the kind with the wavy lines and seemingly abstract patterns, and suddenly seeing the image magically appear on the page.

"I'll say this for them," Veronica said quietly. "At least they're consistent."

Pictures etched right into the platinum blanketed the cathedral room's walls. She immediately recognized an etching of the control panel, and what appeared to be instructions for lowering the orb. Even for the self-destruction of an entire race, the Old Rocktopi relied on simple pictures.

She didn't know much about rocktopi communication, but she knew that of her own species. Without some central cultural reference, such as television or radio, human languages fractured, split and mutated into countless regional dialects. Language dilution could happen so quickly that over only a century someone who spoke the original language couldn't understand the new form.

Veronica could only imagine how much a language could change over the course of eleven thousand years. Even if the rocktopi only changed a single word every *century*, by now 110 words would have changed, perhaps even making the original instructions completely unworkable. After all, blowing up the entire mountain wasn't exactly something they could practice to stay sharp.

The logical answer to this likely problem? Put the instructions in picture form. Simple pictures could provide the rocktopi with a method for self-destruction should their enemy finally arrive. That concept explained the Picture Cavern. The carvings there were instructional, filled with the one message the rocktopi understood all too well—if it comes from the surface, kill it.

Now it was their turn to die.

She looked up at the walls, scanning the instructions. At the top were images of the spiky, wasp-like enemy ships, as well as pictures of some new form she'd never seen before. She didn't recognize it, but it appeared to be a bipedal creature covered with spines. It was long and slender, not even remotely humanoid, with one very long arm that reached forward, ending with what could only be a gun of some sort. She couldn't make out anything resembling a head.

She knew she was looking at the rocktopi's ancient enemy.

Below those pictures were images of the enemy moving into the tunnels. Below that—step-by-step picture instructions for detonating the doomsday device.

The etching's message made perfect sense—if the enemy enters the tunnels, blow up everything. She suddenly admired the rocktopi culture; warriors to the last, so intent on avoiding capture they would bring about their own extinction, practice the ultimate form of euthanasia. But it was the Old Rocktopi she admired, not the current bastardized genetic rejects that mindlessly slaughtered everything in sight.

It was funny to think that this race that once traveled amongst the stars and had the power to move mountains now communicated at a level of primitive humans. She wondered if the same fate lay in store for her own race. Perhaps in the end, the *very* end, mankind would be left with nothing more than crude pictures.

Taking a deep breath, she examined the instructions.

Chapter 47

10:26 a.m.

Connell reached behind O'Doyle's neck and pried away his Marco/Polo sounder. He did the same with Lybrand. It was like picking a small scab.

O'Doyle reached up to remove Connell's, but Connell pushed the gnarled hand away. "No," he said in a hushed voice. There was no way Kayla could hear his voice over the river's roar, yet he still spoke quietly.

"I'm going to lead her away," Connell said. "You get Lybrand to the surface."

"You said she's dangerous. I should take her out, then we can all escape."

Connell shook his head. "Look at yourself, O'Doyle. You won't stand a chance. Trust me on this. I'll talk to her and see what she's up to. At the very least, Kayla will come after me—you can get Lybrand out."

O'Doyle stared at Connell, and Connell stared back. Both men knew the score. O'Doyle wanted to protect Connell, but he wanted to save Lybrand even more. O'Doyle handed Connell his knife. Connell took it, his eyes sending O'Doyle a message of respect, of friendship. In the space of a day they'd become comrades, brothers in arms, the violence and struggle for life forming an unbreakable bond.

O'Doyle's eyes spoke of gratitude, of a debt that could never be repaid.

Connell nodded and stood. "Stay back in the shadows. Without the Marco/Polo dots, she won't see you. Don't try and take her, O'Doyle, or you and Lybrand will

both be dead in seconds. Trust me. Once she's moved past, you go for the Linus Highway and get out."

Without another word, Connell tucked the knife into the back of his belt, then walked around the corner of the ship canyon.

10:28 a.m.

On the Marco/Polo unit's controls, the names of Bertha Lybrand, Patrick O'Doyle, and Connell Kirkland changed from the flashing yellow of a splintered signal to the steady green of a clear contact. Kayla looked up and saw Connell standing at the edge of the ship canyon, a mere fifty yards away. She immediately turned off the Marco/Polo unit and stuffed it in her belt, leaving both hands free. The Galil hung in front of her.

"Connell!" She walked briskly forward. "Are you all right?"

"Stop right there, Kayla."

Kayla stopped

"What's the matter?" she asked innocently.

"What are you doing here?"

She saw the tension in his body, his readiness to spring away at a moment's notice. His hand rested on the ship's hull, ready to pull him behind the edge, out of her line of sight.

"I'm here to rescue you."

"How did you know I needed rescuing? I never told you about the camp."

She didn't answer. His body moved slightly, his chest leaning back just a hair. He was getting ready to bolt. She snapped-grabbed for her Galil ARM, bringing it up and firing a spray of bullets, but Connell was too quick, ducking behind the ship hull just as the bullets splattered loudly against rocks and clanged off platinum.

She sprinted after him and entered the ship canyon's steamy shadows.

10:29 a.m.

O'Doyle only saw her in a flash as she raced by the ship's corner, tearing after Connell with the Marco/Polo in one hand and a Galil ARM in the other. Connell had a 20-second head start, but how long would that last him before she caught up?

O'Doyle waited ten seconds, then rose and pulled Lybrand to her feet. He wished Connell well, but he couldn't help the man anymore. He threw Lybrand over his shoulder and limped out of the bubble room, moving toward the Linus Highway. He had an impossible sprint ahead of him, and even if he escaped the rocktopi, the silverbugs, and Kayla Meyers, Veronica could bring the world crashing down around him at any moment.

Jaw clenched with sheer determination, his good leg pumped under him, carrying them both onto the Linus Highway. It was steeper than he expected, but he never slowed an ounce. O'Doyle attacked the tunnel's rise, pushing his way up, pushing for the surface.

He'd get her out alive. He'd find a way.

10:30 a.m.

It was easy.

Veronica ran through the sequence in her mind, fingers gracing the buttons and levers instead of pressing and turning. She mentally practiced. The only question was when? How much time should she give Connell, O'Doyle, and Lybrand? Veronica ran her fingers over the controls, which now looked very simple. So simple even a child could perform the sequence. Anyone—or anything—with eyes and a modicum of intelligence could do it.

The air was full of the river's roar and the clicks of wandering silverbugs drunk on static. Veronica didn't hear a trio of shiny new silverbugs crawl menacingly from the water's edge and onto the wall.

10:31

Kayla barely saw Connell through the mist. She was gaining on him—time to try for a shot. She raised the Galil ARM and fired a volley at his legs. As she brought the gun down, her right foot slid in the deep mud. Kayla lurched forward, landed on her left knee, then skidded on her face.

She was on her feet quickly, still running after him. The slip had lost her another five seconds, and the knee hurt like a bitch—she couldn't go top speed. But he was also limping, she'd still catch him.

Her face-first slide had covered her with wet, clinging platinum dust. Kayla chased after her prey, unaware that she now looked metallic, like the killing machine that she truly was.

Chapter 48

10:32 a.m.

Angus heard the *click* of silverbug feet somewhere above him and madness started to creep over his brain. They were here. Here in the darkness. Closing in on him. Preparing to jump on his body and cut him to shreds.

Was that a light? He thought he imagined it at first. A light. Coming up the tunnel. A light bouncing with the regularity of someone running. God had heard his call! God had answered him! Rescue was at hand!

The light moved forward. He peered closer, fighting down hysterical laughter. He didn't know who it was, but it didn't look like Kayla. The light filled the tunnel, and suddenly Angus saw his savior.

His heart and soul shrank to a useless little puddle.

O'Doyle stood tall, smiling down, Lybrand draped over his shoulders like a dead deer.

"Hello, coward," O'Doyle said. "I was hoping I'd run into you again."

10:33 a.m.

Connell dashed down the riverbank, skirting rocks, boulders, silverbugs and useless chunks of hull that had fallen away from the towering alien ruin. The misty air caught beams of artificial blue sun pouring down from above, separating light and shadow with clearly definable boundaries. He had a good head start, but she'd catch him soon unless he could slip into the ship's depths and possibly lose her there.

A large passage into the ship's interior opened up chasm-like on his left, no doubt once serving a major thoroughfare for the vessel's internal traffic. He turned sharply and dove for the entrance just as ricocheting bullets erupted in a spray behind him, ringing off the rocks and platinum walls and filling the area with unpredictable, bouncing death. Connell screamed involuntarily as he hit the ground, fear churning in his stomach.

He scrambled to his feet, ready to rush headlong into the dark recesses of the dungeon-like ship. It was his only chance to survive for a few minutes longer. He placed all his weight on his left leg as he rose—and finally the ravaged knee gave out with a snap and a blaring spark of pain.

Connell fell to his back, face twisted into a grimace not only of agony, but also defeat, frustration, and fear. He clutched his knee with both hands. He felt the K-Bar knife handle digging into his back as he tried to rise.

10:35 a.m.

Veronica reread the instruction pictures for the tenth time. After the sequence was completed, all she had to do was push one last button. One last button to start the orb's long trip to the shaft bottom. Veronica estimated the orb's descent would over an hour. Once at the bottom, the orb would detonate and rip the mountain to pieces.

If she could make it across the river and move quickly enough up the Linus Highway, she could make it out alive. But that was a big "if." If she dropped the orb, her chances for survival were slim indeed. That didn't matter—she knew what she had to do.

Her blood chilled in her body; she shivered despite the heat as she started the sequence. With smooth, confident movements, she finished the process in less than a minute. Breath came slowly, the pit of her stomach tightened as she held her finger over the final button. One push to lower the reflective orb. One push.

Veronica's mind heard a noise behind her, the ring of spring-loaded metal. She turned quickly. Three silverbugs—long, evil blades sticking from their wedge-shaped heads—slowly closed in on her with the jittery movements of a spider moving toward a web-ensnared victim.

They were between her and the river. She'd seen no other exits in the cathedralesque room. They moved in, their spindly legs and split-clawed feet clicking menacingly on the stone floor.

Chapter 49

10:36 a.m.

O'Doyle whistled in amazement when he unwrapped the wire from Angus's wrists. The little man's right hand was mangled, each knuckle hugely swollen and bloody. Angus cried out each time O'Doyle brushed the knuckles. He brushed them a few more times than necessary.

Once unwrapped, Angus scooted to the wall, his back against the stone, his ass on the dirt, looking up at O'Doyle. "Are you going to kill me?"

"That's up to you," O'Doyle said. "I need your KoolSuit. I can either take it off your dead body or you can take it off for me."

"You can't take my suit... I'll die."

"Maybe, maybe not," O'Doyle said calmly. "You'll probably reach the surface if you're tough enough. Anyway, I don't care if you make it or not. You have twenty seconds to take that suit off or I kill you right now."

"But you can't leave me naked down here—"

"Twenty... nineteen... eighteen..."

Angus's eyes flared with renewed panic and he raced to remove the suit with his good hand. He had it off before O'Doyle reached five.

"Now turn around," O'Doyle said.

Angus started to whimper and cry, his voice a high-pitched whine. "You can't kill me now!" Sweat was already pouring out of his body. "I did what you said."

"Turn the fuck around!"

Angus instantly turned and faced the wall, waiting for a knife to punch into his skull or heart or throat.

"You stay there," O'Doyle said. "Don't turn around until I tell you to." He grabbed the limp KoolSuit and walked over to Lybrand. He started to remove her shredded suit, then simply ripped it off of her.

"It isn't really a good time for that, is it?" Lybrand said weakly. Open blisters covered her face. She smiled through dry, deeply cracked lips, her eyes half-lidded with delirium.

"Hold on, baby," O'Doyle said as he tossed away the scraps of her ravaged KoolSuit. "Just hold on a few minutes longer."

10:37 a.m.

Kayla turned the corner, a glittering shape of doom silhouetted by the canyon's misty light, the Galil clutched in her hand. Connell watched in helpless fear as she approached. Without a word, she lowered her weapon and squeezed off a single round into his upraised shin. The bullet shattered his fibia, ricocheted off the tibia and erupted out the backside of his leg, taking much of his calf muscle with it in a cloud of chunky red.

Pain like nothing he'd ever experienced filled his mind. He shrieked in agony—his hands moving from the knee to the already blood-soaked leg.

"The old bum-knee trick?" Kayla asked as she took a few more limping steps forward, gun still leveled at Connell. "Or is that old car-accident injury flaring up again? Either way, Connell, I'm not falling for it. We can do this two ways. Are you listening?"

Connell stifled his scream and blinked back the tears pouring from his eyes. He looked up at Kayla. His hands still squeezed tightly around the bullet wound—both front and back—trying to stop the torrent of blood that dripped from the raised leg down his thigh and onto his groin. He managed a nod.

"Good, good," Kayla said, her voice ringing with admiration. "Takes a bullet in the leg and can still listen. You're tougher than I thought, Connell. I'll give you that much."

"Fuck you," Connell said through a clenched-tooth sneer. "Let's get this over with."

"In a hurry to die, Connell?" She kept a good six feet of distance between them, the gun lowered at his chest, her finger firmly on the trigger. The canyon's half-light barely filtered into the huge hallway, casting the scene in a surreal twilight. "Don't be in such a rush."

"Why are you here?"

"I'm afraid you're not my only client. I thought I could sell the info about your platinum mine for a tidy sum. But since I saw the attack on the camp, all of this—" she waved her free hand around and behind her to indicate the ship, "—all of this is going to get me back in the NSA."

"They attacked the camp?"

"Wiped it out," Kayla said. "Killed everyone."

Connell's head fell back on the platinum grating. The metal burned his head, making him lift it up again. Pain, both physical and emotional, squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

"You're too late, Kayla."

"Why's that?"

"Because Dr. Reeves is blowing the whole place up." the pain made Connell grunt his words out in short chunks. "I'd say you've got... about twenty-five minutes to live... but that's just a guess."

Kayla took a quick step forward and kicked Connell in his shattered shin. His hands still covered the wound—he felt one of the fingers in his right hand snap. Agonizing, shearing pain erupted from both wounds. He howled out in rage and protest.

"Shut the fuck up, Connell! don't have time for this melodramatic Hollywood bullshit! You can't think I'm that stupid, buddy boy, you just can't."

Connell didn't answer; he couldn't speak, he could barely hear her words through the tidal-wave of pain. Kayla pulled the Marco/Polo unit from her belt and stared at the screen. A shrilling beep faintly sifted from the unit.

Her face grew tight and wrinkled with rage. "Where are the others? Where are Lybrand and O'Doyle? I need all of you. How did you trick this machine?"

Connell stared at her through eyes slitted with hate. He said nothing. He had to buy time, give O'Doyle a chance to reach the surface.

"Oh I see," Kayla said with a nod. Her eyes and teeth looked a devilish, glowing white in the half-darkness. "This toughness thing is going to your head, is it?" She

set the Galil beside her, reached into a webbing pocket and removed a pair of pliers. She opened them and closed them slowly, letting Connell see every detail.

"I usually start with the knuckles, break every one on both hands, but I'm running out of time." Kayla knelt down next to Connell's head. "So I'm going to start with your testicles. I'm going to crush the left one, unless you tell me what I want to know, and you do it quickly."

Connell's eyes jumped from slits to saucers.

"You don't like the sound of that, do you buddy boy? Well, although I don't actually have nuts myself, I've done it before and it looks pretty darn painful."

Connell lunged for her throat. She swatted his hand away as if he were a clumsy child, and with the same movement smashed his nose with her left fist. Spots swam behind Connell's closed eyelids. He again rolled to his back, hands moving from his leg to his nose, smearing his own blood across his face.

"Well, like my Daddy always used to say, soonest started, soonest done." Kayla pulled a thin loop of copper wire from her webbing.

The countless spots of pain blaring through his body distracted him, but not enough to miss a sudden and repetitive *click-click* that echoed through the arched hallway. Kayla's head snapped around, her hands grabbing the Galil and pointing it toward the threat. Connell opened his eyes, knowing what he'd see.

A dense line of silverbugs bobbed and jerked with snappy movements. In the back of his mind he remembered that Veronica had the scrambler—he wondered if it was destroyed, and her along with it.

"What is this shit?" Kayla asked, a tremor of fear creeping into her voice.

"It means the monsters are coming," Connell said as he quietly rolled to one side, reached behind his back and grabbed O'Doyle's knife. "They follow the lines of silverbugs... we've only got a few seconds before they attack."

"Attack? Do they have weapons?"

"They have knives," Connell said. "A lot like this one."

He swung his body and drove the knife deep into Kayla's thigh. Even as the knife sank to the hilt, she turned her gun toward Connell, her face fused into an animalistic mask of fury. His mind swam with panicked disbelief as the barrel angled toward his face. He pushed himself closer and twisted the knife with all his strength.

Kayla threw her head back in a short grimace of pain, but it was all the time Connell needed. He smashed her face with a vicious, overhanded right, forgetting that she'd broken his index finger until her head rocked back from the blow and pain blasted through his hand. He ignored it.

Kayla fell to her ass, left hand scrambling behind her to slow her fall, right hand still trying to bring the Galil to bear. Connell dove on her, his battle cry a shout of agonizing pain that seemed to erupt from his leg, course up his body, and spill out of his mouth. He landed on her chest, the barrel of her weapon pointing up and past his side. The gun erupted on full automatic; spark-flashes of bullets briefly lit the hallway in a deadly strobe light. Connell knocked the gun away.

She reached for her belt. Connell grabbed at her hand in a panic, knowing she sought a knife. Now on top of her, he drew his head back and brought it forward with all his might, slamming it into her face. Kayla's nose burst in a gush of blood. Her head fell limply back and her body went slack.

Connell cocked back his left fist and blasted her in the face five more times for good measure, snarling and growling with each satisfying punch.

10:43 a.m.

Veronica tried to breathe. Panic filled her soul like an inflating balloon. Her hands fumbled with the scrambler. Why wasn't it working? Its static-screech still filled the dome, but the knife-wielding silverbugs ignored it. They moved steadily toward her, stalking her, now only a few feet away.

Tears of terror filled her eyes. She twisted the volume knob, the frequency knob, anything she could find on the scrambler, fingers racing in a panic.

It made no difference.

The first silverbug sprang at her face. She brought her hands up instinctively. The leaping silverbug crashed into the hot-wired walkie-talkie, smashing it to pieces and scattering the now-useless components on the stone floor. The attacker fell to the ground, but before she could move the second silverbug sprang from her right, its sharp claws fixing fast on her hips and ribs.

The silverbug drove its jagged blade deep into her stomach.

Her throaty cry of agony seemed to awaken the countless maintenance silverbugs, now free of the scrambler's influence. Hundreds of them dove for the river and followed the current downstream, answering some unseen call.

She screamed in pain and terror, smashing down on the silverbug with fists that split open against the round, polished shell. It clutched tightly to her body. She couldn't shake it off. Its jagged blade pulled out and viciously plunged in again just as the last silverbug sprang for her head.

Veronica managed one last terrified, powerful scream before the silverbug's blade slashed through her throat, splattering her blood on its reflective shell, down her chest and on the floor. She fell back heavily against the console, still struggling against the slashing, cutting, stabbing silverbugs even as her life spilled away.

She turned with the last of her waning strength—as she fell to the ground under the weight of the attack, her fingers reached for the final button.

She clicked it home.

Above her prone body, ancient but well-cared-for machinery started to move. The dome trembled as mechanisms unused for eleven thousand years finally rumbled to life. Metallic groans, grinds, and squeaks filled the air. Gears turned in complaint, engines hummed to life.

Somewhere up in the ceiling, somewhere out of sight, the ancient machinery rotated. After the long wait, it finally turned. A massive spool started rolling out its miles-long cable. The orb lowered three feet and then stopped, bobbing ever so slightly from the sudden movement. There it dangled pendulously as the machinery's cries shrieked louder and more insistent.

And then it dropped.

Chapter 50

10:45 a.m.

Angus's canteen held a tiny bit of water, which O'Doyle poured into Lybrand's dry mouth. She swallowed weakly. She didn't look any better, but O'Doyle could already feel her temperature drop to normal levels. His heart surged with hope.

"Please," Angus said. "Please let me go." He was still sitting cross-legged and facing the tunnel wall. Acrid sweat covered his naked body. The smell of his fear filled the cavern.

"Shut up," O'Doyle said over his shoulder. He looked down warmly at Lybrand. "How do you feel?" She blinked a few times and looked up at him, her eyes clear for the first time since they'd entered the river.

Her voice was a thin whisper. "Like crap—but better."

O'Doyle lifted her up and again threw her over his shoulder. He glared doleful at Angus.

"Turn around," O'Doyle said. Naked, Angus turned slowly, looking terrified, as if he expected to be stabbed at any moment. "You wait here, count to three hundred, and then come up the tunnel. I don't want you getting in my way. If I see you again, I'll kill you, do you understand?"

Angus nodded softly, eyes already weak with heat exhaustion.

click-click, click

O'Doyle turned and looked back down the tunnel. A single silverbug crouched motionless on the wall. Only one, but more weren't far behind. Without another word he turned and moved quickly up the Linus Highway, struggling with Lybrand's weight and his own tortured body.

Angus sat on his ass, transfixed by the silverbug, a look of horror frozen on his face. Caught between two evils, he slowly started counting. He made it as far as 263 before he stood and sprinted, screaming with madness, into a side tunnel.

11:01 a.m.

Ignoring the pain, or at least pretending to, Connell ripped away Kayla's equipment and weapons and tossed them in a pile. He clutched her machine gun tightly. It surprised him how good the weapon felt in his hands. He pulled three full magazines from her web gear, stuffing two in his belt and popping the third into the gun.

He knew he had only a few seconds to act.

Keeping one eye on Kayla's prone body, he hobbled to the hallway's edge and looked down the line of silverbugs.

The rocktopi splashed down the narrow riverbank on both sides, flashing brilliantly in the cavern's misty light, waving knives and tentacles, screeching their bloodlust—they'd reach him in only a few minutes. Connell tried testing his weight on the ravaged leg; pain blasted through him. He couldn't walk on it at all. He'd never outrun them.

He looked back to Kayla. She rolled slightly to her left, slowly regaining consciousness. Connell grabbed her knife and handgun. He threw the weapons to

the river's edge, just a few feet shy of the water. The silverbug line continued to jerk and click with sickening repetition.

"Kayla, wake up!" He watched her hands instinctively flash first to her shoulder holster, then to the sheath at her waist. Finding both empty, Kayla grabbed the first rock that presented itself and tried to sit up.

"Don't move!"

She looked up, eyes glazed over with pure hatred. "You'd better shoot me now." One hand clutched the rock, the other jammed against the gushing knife wound in her leg. "If you don't, I'm gonna cut your balls off and stuff them down your throat."

Connell wanted to flash a glance down the riverbank, check the rocktopi's progress, but he didn't dare take his eyes off her. She could probably throw that rock like Nolan Ryan.

"I've left your handgun and knife at the river's edge behind me. The monsters are coming. If you come out of there before I'm out of sight, I'll kill you."

Connell left the hallway behind and hopped into the water. The river would take him away. He was on the Linus Highway side, so he didn't have to fight the full current—it wouldn't take much strength to get to the shore.

It was crazy to not only leave Kayla alive, but leave her with a weapon. He knew this, but she was his only chance.

11:04 a.m.

Rocktopi swarmed out of the river, over the wall and onto the orb platform. They moved tentatively and stayed close together, looking around in awe and fear at every inch of the ship. They were filled with reverent wonder at this place they'd heard of only in legend. One of the horrible, murderous yellow-skinned monsters was there, already cut to properly sized pieces, its red blood smeared and steaming on the stone floor.

A few rocktopi wandered to the control panel, a few skirted the edges of the room and a few more peered down the shaft. The orb dropped steadily downward. As it descended, ancient lights surged to life, or at least tried to. Most of them flickered uselessly or simply didn't turn on at all, long since claimed by the persistent fingers of time. A few managed to sputter fully awake. They cast dim reflections on the orb's polished surface.

A silverbug crawled from the river and perched on the stone breakwater. With water still beading on its shell, it began jerking convulsively. One of the rocktopi screeched loudly and pulsed a dim green before leaping over the wall and back into the river. The other rocktopi quickly followed, leaving behind the shaft and the distant, shiny object falling into its depths.

They never knew its purpose.

Chapter 51

11:06 a.m.

She'd waited long enough.

Kayla struggled to rise to her feet. Her head throbbed with sunbursts of pain. She hadn't been hit that hard in a long time. Connell proved to be much more of a man than she'd given him credit for. She wanted to kick herself—she'd known enough not to underestimate his mind, but hadn't thought his lanky frame capable of such lightning speed.

She kept her fist jammed into the knife wound as she struggled to rise. Why Connell let her live, she had no idea, but it would be his last mistake. She no longer gave a shit about the others, about the NSA, about anything. All she cared about was gutting Connell Kirkland. She limped down the hall, toward the river and her weapons. The silverbug line clicked and bobbed, scattering away from her and re-forming as she passed.

Her instincts loudly sounded an alarm. Screeches, just like the ones she'd heard during the camp attack, filled her ears along with the river's insistent pounding. The monsters had to be close, she had to move despite the pain. Why would Connell leave her a weapon? It didn't make any sense. She struggled to reach the riverbank and the safety of her Steyr GB-80, which sat a few feet shy of the water's edge.

She moved out of the hall and looked downstream. A wall of glowing monsters poured down the riverbank toward her, the mist magnifying their flashing red and orange bursts like stoplights illuminating the morning fog. Recoiling in horror, she grabbed her weapon and started firing.

She suddenly realized Connell's intent as the Steyr's deafening thunder briefly drowned out the hunting screeches.

She was a diversion. Something to slow the rocktopi while he got away. Even wounded, her expert aim blasted into the oncoming wave, dropping them like big, wet blankets. But there were too many.

Her subconscious counted off nineteen shots—she scrambled for another magazine, but the lead rocktopi dove for her, its wicked crescent knife flashing in the misty air. Snarling, she ducked and snatched her own knife from the ground.

The swirling mass of colors and tentacles closed in around her.

11:07 a.m.

Connell crawled to shore at the ship's edge just as he heard Kayla's weapon cap off a dozen quick shots. He wondered if she'd have time to reload as he hobbled toward the Linus Highway entrance, dragging his flopping, useless leg behind him.

A woman's agonizing scream echoed high off the cavern walls and ceiling. Yet another of his employees had met death at the hands of the rocktopi; only this time he didn't mind at all.

He limped into the Linus Highway and started up the steep slope.

11:21 a.m.

A few more faint lights flickered to life, illuminating the orb's descent. The lights' reflections followed the curved surface, starting out at the bottom, gradually arcing around the side and then sliding to the top as the orb fell down and down and down.

Reflections of massive, rough-hewn pillars, each larger than the Eiffel tower, thicker than a skyscraper, each a monument of engineering and long-dead technological prowess, glided over the polished platinum. For several minutes the pillars' images alone covered the orb's sides, until a new reflection arced across the metallic surface, gradually growing larger and more defined.

Clearly lit, a fish-eye reflection of the cave floor swelled on the orb's bottom.

11:36 a.m.

"Put me down," Lybrand said. "I can walk."

"You can't walk," O'Doyle said through tortured breaths as he stumbled up the tunnel. "You're hurt."

"Put me down, dammit!"

O'Doyle leaned against the stone wall and gently lowered her to the ground. Sweat covered his ashen face. He struggled to remain standing.

"I'm hurt, but I can make it," Lybrand said. "The KoolSuit helped. I can walk, can you?"

"I'll damn well find the strength to walk out of here," O'Doyle said. "Let's go, the rocktopi are coming."

They struggled on, holding each other up, knowing full well that the silverbugs were behind them, that the rocktopi couldn't be far off. They dashed up the steep tunnel, beaten and battered, pushed far beyond the point of exhaustive collapse.

11:41 a.m.

Connell's vision blurred and he fell heavily to his side. It was blood loss, not heat, that finally dragged him down. He knew he lay dying. He peered up the Linus Highway. How much farther to go? He couldn't do it. He just couldn't.

The distant screeches of the rocktopi suddenly grew louder, cacophonous in the narrow tunnel. They were coming. Connell rolled to his back and shook his head, trying to clear his vision. He blinked a few times, then sat up. He couldn't pass out now. He had to go on, kill as many of them as he could, give O'Doyle and Lybrand a chance.

Connell unhooked the gun's black nylon strap and tied it around his leg, just below the knee. He pulled it tight with a vicious snap and swallowed the scream that tried to erupt from his lungs. He snarled, looped the strap again, and pulled even tighter. He had to stop the bleeding, or at least slow it enough to stay conscious for a little while longer.

Too weak to stand, Connell clutched the gun in one hand, pushing it in front of him as he crawled on hands and knees up the Linus Highway.

11:59 a.m.

Twenty miles below Connell's feet, the orb finished its descent, landing lightly on the shaft floor. The heat raged at just over 1,900 degrees Fahrenheit. An internal computer quickly processed data on air pressure, heat, and distance traveled. Finding those readings suitable, the computer triggered the detonator.

Chapter 52

Noon

The orb shuddered once, then disappeared in a nova of light brighter than the sun. Impossibly powerful shockwaves lashed out at supersonic speeds, disintegrating the countless support pillars in a billowing burst of evaporated stone. A great rumbling and shaking began as millions of tons of rock, now without support from below, began to settle into the newly created void.

Devastating heat from the blast raced up the deep shaft, melting rock along the way. Within seconds the blast erupted into the Dense Mass cavern, spurting upward like a geyser in an expanding cloud of destruction. The orb's cathedral room, which sat in the center of the immortal metal hull, sagged like cheap wax and collapsed in on itself, in seconds going from a magnificent technological monument to a white-hot sea of molten metal. Silverbugs erupted like popcorn, then quickly dissolved into the boiling pool of metal. Like a ring rippling from a pebble in a pond, the explosive heat reached out from the ship's center, melting the timeless vessel in a quickly expanding wave.

The shockwaves also traveled straight downward, winning the battle between the irresistible force and immovable object. Rock simply ceased to exist as star-like temperatures evaporated everything within reach, creating a huge bubble of superheated gas.

The orb didn't punch a hole through the Earth's mantle. It didn't have to. The cold, calculated, precise science that had carved out the pillars had placed the shaft's bottom a geological hair's width from the swirling mantle. For millennia, the Earth's internal pressure pushed against the shaft floor, obeying the laws of physics and seeking the easiest way out. But the shaft floor's precise design held just enough strength to keep that incalculable force at bay, just enough to keep things as they were meant to be.

The orb, however, melted another half mile worth of crust, a calculation as fixed and precise as a surgeon's stroke. At the bottom of that newly created bubble of plasma, the Earth's pressure—so long held in check by the thinnest of margins—finally broke free.

Magma rocketed upward with tidal-wave force, pushed ever higher by the liquid core's grinding, pulsating pressures. It quickly filled the new pocket and continued up the shaft, pushing the 10,000-degree gas bubble before it, racing toward the ravaged ship and the Dense Mass cavern.

12:04 p.m.

O'Doyle and Lybrand crawled on their bellies, urged on by the unmistakable smell of fresh, outside air. The ground shuddered beneath them, pouring fuel on their desperate effort to escape the mountain.

The low rock ceiling scrapped at O'Doyle's back. He grunted as he worked his thick trunk through the narrow opening, the rock tearing away his KoolSuit with long rips and shreds. The suit no longer mattered this close to the surface.

12:05 p.m.

The ground beneath Connell shook and lurched like a bucking bronco, knocking him about so violently that he couldn't even stay on his hands and knees. He fell to his chest. The grinding sound of mammoth boulders breaking free of the mountain's motionless grasp filled his ears. Cracks raced up the tunnel walls like bolts of splitting lightning. Thick, swirling storm clouds of dust seeped into the air.

Connell looked up to see a fist-sized piece of rock fall from the tunnel ceiling, dust trailing behind it like a comet's tail. The rock bounced off the wildly shaking floor and settled against the tunnel wall—then the entire ceiling gave way in an avalanche of bellowing, angry rock.

Connell barely had time to raise his arms over his head before the boulders crushed down on him.

12:07 p.m.

Magma exploded out of the shaft floor, a great gushing pillar of molten rock jetting against the tunnel ceiling more than two thousand feet above. There it licked against an artificial sun, which sputtered once and then fell dark. A great rain of magma splashed off the ceiling, across the cavern, and fell into the hellish pool of bubbling, liquefied hull.

Confused silverbugs scattered everywhere, rushing pell-mell in all directions. Some rushed headlong into the boiling pools and melted in a fraction of a second. Some scattered up the walls, only to be peeled off by the torrential cascade of scorching lava. Some fell motionless where they stood, baked to death in heat rivaling that at the Earth's center.

Rocktopi dropped dead by the hundreds, instantly cooked in the expanding heat and sulfurous fumes that filled the massive cavern. Swirling magma covered the floor, forming a hell-spawned lake that rose slowly up the cavern walls. Boiling rock poured like water, flowing into the countless tunnels connected to the cavern, splashing orange-hot and destroying everything in its path.

The constant shaking finally claimed the Dense Mass cavern. The floor cracked and jumped, ripped apart by billions of tons of settling rock. The ceiling collapsed, dropping boulders the size of city blocks into the soupy mix of melted ship and liquid rock.

The orb's burst of energy created a void that nature had to fill. The mountain slowly fell in on itself as magma continued to stream upward toward the sky like blood hosing from some giant's severed jugular.

12:08 p.m.

The Land Rover rocked wildly on its shocks, bouncing like some child's toy as the ground shook and rumbled. Sonny kept both hands firmly on the hood, trying to keep his balance.

"Sonofabitch!" His voice rang with amazement and joy. He couldn't take his eyes off Funeral Mountain's death-throes. "Sonofabitch that's somethin' to see!"

The peak seemed to fold in on itself, like a massive parody of a circus tent with the center stake kicked out. Unfathomable mounds of rock dropped backwards out of sight, and the mountain itself simply *fell*. The ground shook with an angry wrath. Sonny held on against the shockwaves, transfixed as the cursed place tore itself apart.

He screamed with laughter and shook his fist at the dying mountain. Sonny hoped Kayla was in there somewhere. He had to get out of there and very soon, but he kept scanning the mountain with his binoculars, looking to see if any of them had made it out.

12:11 p.m.

Lybrand saw it first. She screamed with the victorious joy of a winning gladiator. "Sunlight! We're almost there!"

O'Doyle could barely hear her above the rumbling din that filled the tunnels with deafening, demanding insistence. The ground jolted unpredictably under his chest—it felt like trying to crawl across a giant trampoline while a thousand children bounced to their hyper hearts' content. He feared that at any moment the narrow ceiling would give way and smash him like a human sandwich.

They heard a massive tunnel section give way somewhere behind them. The patch of jostling sunlight grew brighter, and then they were out, trying to stand on the wildly shaking plateau. O'Doyle grabbed Lybrand's hand, his eyes searching for the best way down the dancing mountain.

12:12 p.m.

"Well I'll be dipped in pig shit," Sonny said as he stared through the binoculars. Two people on the little plateau where he'd crawled into the tunnels only days before. O'Doyle and Lybrand—even at this distance he could see they were in bad shape and in deep trouble.

"Well, you only live once," Sonny said as he stumbled into the driver's seat. He gunned the Land Rover's engine and shot toward the mountain.

12:19 p.m.

The rumbling eased as Lybrand and O'Doyle raced down the slope, falling more often than running. Nothing short of a decapitation could stop them now. She didn't turn around to look, but she could feel the ground giving way behind them, falling away into some bottomless chasm inside the mountain.

They moved forward with all their strength, all their determination. They would not stop, no matter what the injury. Suddenly a new, deeper roar filled the air, like the sound of a mountain-sized panther. They felt a wave of blistering heat across their backs.

12:20 p.m.

"Sonofabitch!" Sonny screamed, his laughter now long gone. "Sonofabitch!" He had to get to those people. Sonny fought the urge to turn the Rover around and head out—despite the horror he saw before him.

A billowing geyser of molten rock erupted from the center of the former mountain, spraying high into the air with grace and power. The Rover grazed a boulder and bounced harshly to the right. Sonny forced himself to look at the path, tearing his eyes away from the pillar of fire.

A giant boulder rolled toward him, bouncing like a rubber ball. He swerved to the left, narrowly avoiding it.

He spotted O'Doyle and Lybrand. Sonny slammed the brakes, bringing the Rover to a sliding halt. He hopped out and ran to them. They looked as if every part of their bodies was damaged, cut, bleeding or broken. Only their eyes looked strong, determination fixed in them as if they were chiseled from stone.

12:21 p.m.

"I don't believe it," O'Doyle said, never slowing his forward progress. "Sonny McGuinness to the rescue." His arm around Lybrand's shoulder, they raced for the Land Rover.

The mountain shook with landlocked thunder as the magma plume sputtered once, then roared ever higher. Burning ash splashed down all around them, searing their skin and melting their KoolSuits. Chunks of smoking rock crashed everywhere. O'Doyle had to wonder if they were hurled by ghosts of the recently cooked rocktopi, lashing out from their new home in hell.

Sonny slid under O'Doyle's arm and pulled him roughly toward the Rover. He shoved O'Doyle and Lybrand into the back seat. Burning rocks and barely cooled airborne lava peppered the car like deadly hail. Black paint bubbled and peeled as Sonny gunned the engine and drove headlong back down the two-track path. Within seconds, they drove free of the aerial assault.

O'Doyle and Lybrand never looked back—they both passed out in the back seat, laying on top of each other, moving only when the Rover turned sharply or careened off a rock.

Behind them all, the new volcano continued to rage into the darkening sky. Most of its magma fell within a half mile of the plume, and slowly but surely, the cone of a new peak started to reach away from the sunken grave of Funeral Mountain.

12:24 p.m.

The intense heat no longer affected Connell. His hands and feet grew numb with chill. He coughed once, spitting blood all over his chin and onto the rock that pinned him motionless. Pain covered every part of his ravaged body, but it didn't bother him—it felt distant, as if it were a picture, a memory.

He opened his eyes but could see nothing. Darkness covered him. He struggled for air, managing only short breaths, fighting the pain of broken ribs and the confining weight of the boulder on his chest.

Motionless. Trapped. Even if he had a part of his body that wasn't broken, ripped or pulverized, he couldn't move it due to the boulder-tomb that held him still. Only one hand lay free—he could have wiggled it had it not already been smashed to bloody paste.

He tried another breath and coughed up more blood. Agony splashed through his lungs. The fear of death washed over him, crowding out everything else. In a haze of pain and half consciousness, Connell waited to die.

A faint light flashed through the cracks between the boulders. A warm light, a joyous light. Connell tried to look toward it, but could not move his fractured head. The light seemed to penetrate his body, wash through him, ease the pain. A voice called out from the light.

His favorite voice. Cori's voice.

"Pea," he said. "Oh, Pea..."

"I'm here with you, love. Don't be afraid."

Connell's mind faded in and out, not knowing if she was real or just a vision of his fading brain. He didn't care. She was with him again. Her light filled him, erasing his agony, relaxing his devastated body.

He felt something warm and tender gently lift his crushed hand. He instantly recognized her touch. He didn't mind the pain, as long as he could feel her again.

Connell's hand slowly grew cold in hers, and with a tiny smile on his face, his half-lidded eyes faded away into a blank stare of stillness and peace.

Epilogue

Patrick O'Doyle knew leadership when he saw it.

The woman sitting behind the desk in front of him was old, out of shape, and without her glasses could probably see all of three feet. The eyes behind those glasses looked red and swollen, puffy bags beneath them hanging darkly. She wouldn't last five minutes in the field. She wouldn't have lasted three minutes in the tunnels.

But she didn't have to last five minutes. She could sit in her chair, smoking her cigar, and call the shots from a thousand miles away. This woman had money, which meant she had power—the kind of power that would let her send a killer halfway around the world to exact revenge.

A killer named Patrick O'Doyle.

Before today, he had never heard Barbara Yakely speak. Her voice sounded like gravel sprinkled with heartbreak.

"So these... these, *things*... they killed my Connell?"

"Yes ma'am."

"You're sure he's dead?"

"Yes ma'am, there's no way he could have survived that volcano. I'm sorry, but Mr. Kirkland is gone."

She looked down at her desk, her body seemed to deflate. O'Doyle had seen this reaction before, he'd been there when people simply lost the will to live. It hurt to even look at her like this, this woman he barely knew, because she felt the loss of Connell Kirkland even deeper than he did. But he wasn't there for a pity party. He wasn't there to cry, and he wasn't there to give comfort.

He had a budget.

He had a timeline.

He had a race to exterminate.

"This plan of yours, this Argentina thing," Barbara said. "Is it going to be dangerous?"

"Yes ma'am, very dangerous."

"And more lives will be at risk?"

"Yes ma'am."

"So why do you want to go? What macho bullshit is this that you want to risk your life? I mean look at you, O'Doyle—you're not exactly a spring chicken. Maybe you and I should be playing a couple of games of Euchre at the VFW instead of you doing this Billy Bad-Ass thing."

"What's Euchre?"

"Card game. You must not be from Michigan."

"No ma'am. Kansas."

"It doesn't matter, honey. Look, I read your file. You did your job for our country, you did your job for EarthCore. Now fucking retire already."

"I know what I'm doing, ma'am."

Barbara pointed to Bertha Lybrand, who sat in the chair next to O'Doyle.

"And are you taking this nice woman with you?"

"Yes ma'am. We're in this together."

Barbara sighed and looked at Bertha. "Let me see your hand again, honey."

Bertha held up her left hand. She still had a thumb, but her index and middle fingers were gone, reduced to stitch-covered stumps still stained with disinfectant from the surgery she'd had only two days before. A shining, platinum band sat on her ring finger. Neat stitches lined her left temple, a running black line that ran straight through where the top of her ear used to be.

"How long have you two been married?"

"About 48 hours, ma'am," Bertha said. "We were married in the hospital."

"And this is what you two idiots want to do with your honeymoon? Get a group of mercenaries together, fly to Argentina, and take on some ancient ship full of aliens buried under a mountain? What, you never heard of Disneyland?"

"Like my husband said, ma'am, we're in this together."

Barbara stared. First at Bertha. Then at O'Doyle. Their faces didn't flinch. O'Doyle was going to Mt. Fitzroy whether Barbara Yakely footed the bill or not. She could make it easier, get them better equipped, but he wasn't here to get her permission.

"Why?" Barbra finally said. "Why would you do this? It's not going to bring my Connell back."

"Because..." O'Doyle started to speak, then closed his mouth as a wave of emotion crashed over him. The words he was about to say, he hadn't said them in over a decade. His throat felt suddenly parched, and his eyes seemed to water up. He blinked twice, took a deep breath, and controlled himself. This was no time for grief. For Patrick O'Doyle, grief wasn't expressed while sitting in a comfortable office—it was expressed while killing whatever caused that grief.

"Because Connell Kirkland was my friend, Ma'am."

Barbara stared at him again, long and hard this time, with the look that said 'I can spot a peanut-sized spec of bullshit from 1,000 feet away.' But there was no bullshit to be found in Patrick O'Doyle.

"Give me your budget," she said, and Patrick handed over the ten-page document. She flipped through it slowly, reading every word. She didn't rush it. Patrick and Bertha waited patiently for her to finish.

"This is a lot of firepower, Mr. O'Doyle."

"I like to be prepared, ma'am."

"And what makes you think the Argentinean authorities are going to allow this to happen."

O'Doyle unconsciously rubbed his right biceps, massaging the rectangle of skin tattooed a light blue crossed by a horizontal white stripe, with a radiating sun in the middle.

"I've done some business there before," O'Doyle said. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

"A half-million isn't chump-change, O'Doyle. What makes you think I want to part with it?"

"Because you don't give a rat's ass about the money, ma'am, if I may be so frank, and neither do I."

Barbara looked back down at the budget, but it was obvious she wasn't reading it this time. She just wanted to hide her eyes, hide the tears forming there.

"I lost thirty-seven people on that dig," she said softly. "Thirty-seven people in my employ. I knew those people. I had to call their families and tell them. Do you know what that's like?"

O'Doyle nodded. "Yes ma'am. I know exactly what that's like."

Barbara nodded slowly. "Yes, I bet you do. I don't want to see anyone else die."

Bertha sat forward, reached out her stumpy hand, and gently grabbed Barbara's hand. To her credit, the old woman didn't even flinch.

"Patrick and I are going with or without EarthCore's backing," Bertha said softly. "People will be at risk no matter what you do. He just thought you'd like to be a part of it. To get your own payback, so to speak."

"I'll pay you *not* to go," Barbara said. "I'll give you a million dollars if you leave this madness behind and start your new life together."

O'Doyle shook his head. "No thank you, ma'am. Like my wife said, we're going."

Barbara sighed, wiped a lone tear from her eye and nodded.

"I knew you'd say that. I can see it in you, O'Doyle. Alright, I'll fund your stupid, pointless mission of revenge."

She wrote a number on a business card and handed it to him.

"Call this number in the morning. My man Harvey will set up everything for you. It can't be traceable to EarthCore, you understand."

"Of course, ma'am," O'Doyle said.

She swiveled in her chair, turning her back to them, looking out her Renaissance Center window that gave a sprawling view of the Detroit River. O'Doyle stood, knowing he's been dismissed. Bertha followed him to the door.

"O'Doyle," Barbara said without turning, stopping them just before they left. Her voice was thick with tears now, tears the old woman could no longer hide.

"Yes ma'am?"

"Kill them all," she said through choked sobs. "Kill every last one of those motherfuckers."

O'Doyle nodded. "Don't worry ma'am. I'll handle everything."

Patrick and Bertha O'Doyle walked out of the office, both of them still limping a little bit, and headed for home.

There was much to do before their mission to Mt. Fitzroy.

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