



GRAHAM BROWN DOOMSDAY

MANKIND'S DAYS ARE NUMBERED...



Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

Author's Note

Praise

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

Chapter 56

Chapter 57

Chapter 58

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

Chapter 63

Chapter 64

Chapter 65

Chapter 66

Chapter 67

Chapter 68

Chapter 69

Chapter 70

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Copyright

About the Book

A DEADLY COUNTDOWN HAS BEGUN...

Deep in the heart of the Amazon, an ancient Mayan stone is generating massive waves of energy while counting down to the apocalyptic date of December 21st 2012.

Using a cryptic map and a prophecy that points to the end of the world, maverick agent Hawker and his partner Danielle Laidlaw are in a race-against-time to find the stone before it falls into the hands of a foreign power. And before the countdown stops...

About the Author

Graham Brown grew up in the United States, but travelled often to the UK to visit with grandparents in London and Sussex. He went to college in deserts of the western US out in Arizona, learning to fly small planes in the process. Later, he attended Law School and after several years practicing law, decided he hadn't tried enough different careers yet and sat down determined to become a writer.

Graham currently lives in Arizona where he's at work on his third novel and a group of short stories. When he's not writing, he's either skiing (in the winter), riding a motorcycle (in the summer) or pretending he knows how to golf every chance he gets. Which is never often enough. He's also planning a trip to England that will have to include good seats for his father at a Chelsea football match, to keep a promise he made years ago.

Praise for *The Mayan Conspiracy*:

'The Mayan Conspiracy sizzles with tension and twists that both entertain and magnetize. The plot envelops the reader into a brilliantly conceived world, full of strange and amazing things. Graham Brown is an exciting new talent, a writer we're going to be hearing a lot from in the years ahead. I can't wait.'

Steve Berry

'... an adventure that's not only a terrific read but is smart, intelligent, and poised to shake up the whole thriller community. Every copy should come with a bucket of popcorn and a John Williams soundtrack to play in the background. I loved it.'

Linwood Barclay

'Action-packed ... The fast pace ... will keep readers forging ahead.'

Publishers Weekly

GRAHAM BROWN

DOOMSDAY



For those who believe

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THANK YOU FOR joining me on this latest adventure. For those interested in the creative process and the blend of fact and fiction in this novel, I offer the following, beginning with my own thoughts on 2012.

At this point in time, it would be almost impossible not to have heard of the Mayan prophecy. Knowing that other authors and filmmakers had already explored the same subject, I felt it was important to take a different path. That path centered on three questions:

1. What did the Mayan people really think about 2012?
2. What type of event could possibly change the world or destroy a good portion of it?
3. If the prophecy were to come true, how could the Mayan people have possibly known?

In answering the first question, I found that the concept of a 2012 cataclysm is far more ingrained in our society than it was in the Mayan one. The primary source of the 2012 prophecy is the writings of Chilam Balam, the Jaguar Priest. These texts were written after the Spanish conquest, and while they do contain references to dark events occurring at the end of the thirteenth Baktun (December 21, 2012), the vast majority of the writing focuses on other, more mundane parts of Mayan life, and in some ways serves as a method of explaining the oppression of the conquistadors.

Interestingly enough, the Jaguar Priest's books were actually written at different times, in different places, and by different people, yet they are referred to as if they were the work of a single person, as if some greater force was behind the whole. In time, this thought worked its way into the novel, with the fictional concept of the Brotherhood of the Jaguar: a hidden group acting as one, carrying out their mission, throughout time and despite all odds.

Beyond the words of Chilam Balam, there is less to go on than one might imagine. But less is not nothing. The Tortugero Monument Six is indeed a reality. It lies in a place once ruled by Ahau Balam, the Jaguar Lord, in what is now the Mexican state of Tabasco. Tortugero Monument Six is one of the very few—in fact some say the only—hieroglyphic carving directly referencing the end of Baktun 13. As described in the book, it tells of Bolon Yokte, the god of change (or the god of war, according to some), descending from the Black “something” and accomplishing a great feat. Interestingly enough, Bolon Yokte is as much a mystery as the 2012 reference itself. Little is known about this god and his place in Mayan theism. As described in the book, a portion of the carving is damaged and thus a full translation/interpretation is impossible. Could it be the Black Sun, or the Black Sky? No one knows at this point, and unless something new comes to light we probably never will.

To answer the second question, I had to find a new way to destroy the world. Not as easy as you might think! This earth and the creatures that live on it have proven incredibly adaptive to change. Ice ages, droughts, plagues: Life has survived all of these. Earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, no problem. Life even survived a rock the size of mount Everest hitting our planet at 70,000 miles an hour (the Chicxulub impact, which is believed to have destroyed the dinosaurs).

As I considered this, it occurred to me that we constantly hear how nature is going to rise up and throw off the burden of man, destroying us in the process. And yet, even nature's greatest efforts have little effect on mankind as a whole. So I chose to write from the opposite perspective: Even if nature could not destroy man, man almost certainly had the power to destroy nature and himself.

And that left the question of how the Mayan people could have known or predicted this. There were only two ways that I could fathom: either they could see the future in some form of clairvoyance (an answer that was not concrete enough for me), or it was told to them by someone who knew it. In the greater sense, the theme of time travel had been settled on during the writing of *Mayan Conspiracy*, the novel that preceded this book, but I had chosen that theme with this end already in mind. Of course, as far as we know, no one has ever traveled back to meet us, but there are enough theoretical physicists who think it might happen someday for me to believe in the possibility.

As for other facts and fiction in *Doomsday*, please read on.

Geomagnetic Reversal

According to the geologic record, the earth's magnetic field has reversed many times throughout its history. During certain eras it has been incredibly stable, including forty million years during the Cretaceous period. At other times it has reversed quickly, with only fifty thousand or a hundred thousand years between changes.

Our current field orientation has held for 780,000 years, but it is weakening. As described in the book, this weakening has accelerated over the past hundred years or so, for reasons unknown. As the magnetic pole weakens, it also moves, but there are other, perhaps more sinister

effects—cracks and fissures that have already begun to expose us to the radiation of the solar wind.

The largest of these is known as the South Atlantic Anomaly. Discovered in 1958, the SAA is a weak spot or low point in the earth's magnetic field, and it is growing larger. While the SAA isn't dangerous to humans on Earth, it is big problem for spacecraft in low earth orbit. Astronauts have reported strange vision problems when transiting the area. The International Space Station was designed with enhanced shielding because it often operates in this zone, and many satellites and even the Hubble telescope are shut down as they pass through this region, as a precaution against failure.

So is this a sign of things to come? No one can be sure. If the magnetic field continues to weaken, it is expected that other anomalies will appear; perhaps the earth will be covered with them. In essence, the premise of this book is the question of what would happen if one massive anomaly appeared instantly during a time of great political turmoil and blinded the eyes of the world.

Sharks: Ampullae of Lorenzini

All sharks contain such magnetic sensing organs called ampullae of Lorenzini. They are believed to assist the sharks in navigation as they prowl the dark seas with nothing else to guide them. The ampullae are also used in hunting prey, as all organisms give off a small electric charge.

Hammerhead sharks are known to have an acute sense of electrical charges, as their wider heads create better platforms from which the electrical sensing organs operate. Hammerheads have often been observed swimming in schools of a hundred or more (as Danielle and Hawker encountered), though they are thought to separate at night and hunt alone.

The Tunguska Blast

On June 30, 1908, a massive explosion rocked the Siberian tundra. A flash was seen in the sky and a shock-wave was felt hundreds of miles away. When explorers reached the area years later, they found trees knocked over in a strange butterflylike shape that measured forty-five miles across. No crater was ever found.

Current theory centers on an air burst of a meteor or asteroid, though dozens of other theories have been proposed, including a super volcano residing underneath Lake Cheko. As far as I know, the Russians never found any items of extraordinary power during their many expeditions to the area, but then again, do you think they would tell us if they had?

PROLOGUE

Bering Sea, November 2012

THE FIFTY-FOOT TRAWLER *Orlovsky Star* pushed on through frigid Arctic waters and a lingering fog that seemed to have no end. The sea was unusually calm and the wind nonexistent, but with the outside temperature dipping to fifteen degrees Fahrenheit and the water holding just above the freezing point, the conditions were anything but benign.

Alexander Petrov stood at the wheel inside the darkened pilothouse, a grim air surrounding him. His weathered face, shaved head, and clenched jaw all suggested a burden his broad shoulders were struggling to carry. He stared into the darkness ahead of the boat, listening to the thrum of the engine and the occasional muted thump of ice banging against the hull.

So far the ice had been thin: small, free-floating chunks that his boat could slide through at half speed. But the pack ice formed quickly at this time of year, spreading south like a plague, and just an hour before there had been no ice at all.

Guiding the boat on feel as much as sight, Petrov considered the danger: If the ship didn't reach warmer waters soon, they'd be trapped and the thin hull ground into metal filings long before any rescuer could reach them.

Then again, perhaps they deserved such a fate for what they were attempting to do.

As another impact reverberated through the cabin, a voice spoke from behind him. "It's getting thicker. We need to make better speed."

Petrov glanced into the recesses of the darkened pilothouse. A heavysset man gazed back at him. This was Vasili, a Russian of mixed European and Asian descent and the broker of their unholy deal, the keeper of their unusual human cargo.

Despite the cold, Petrov could see a thin sheen of perspiration on Vasili's upper lip. If Petrov was right,

Vasili's mind was reeling in a battle between greed and fear, between the possibilities of life-altering wealth just days away and a horrible death in the crushing embrace of the ice.

"What are you really worried about, Vasili?"

"That we're lost," he said bluntly, glancing at an exposed circuit board and what had been their navigation system.

The GPS receiver had shorted out eight hours before, the screen flashing and the casing catching fire in a shower of sparks. Petrov had examined it briefly but saw that it was clearly beyond repair. For an hour he'd used the stars to guide them, but the fog had thickened and he'd been forced to rely on the vessel's compass.

"I was a fisherman before I joined the navy. I learned to navigate at the hands of my father," Petrov assured him. "I know what I'm doing,"

Vasili stepped closer to him. "The crew is worried," he whispered. "They say our journey is cursed."

"Cursed?"

"Orcas followed us down the channel," Vasili explained. "And we've seen sharks every morning. Far too many for such northern waters."

That had seemed odd, Petrov thought, as if the predators of the sea were shadowing them, waiting for a meal to be delivered into their hungry bellies. But he hoped it was mere coincidence.

"It's almost dawn," Petrov said, changing the subject. "We'll have a few hours of light, nothing more, but it should be enough. The fog will lift and we'll make better time."

Petrov's statement was designed to ease Vasili's fears, but even as he spoke, they found another mass of ice and a grinding resonance traveled down the starboard side. From the sound alone, they could tell it was thicker and heavier than those they had hit before.

Petrov reduced the speed to five knots. This was the trap he'd been hoping to avoid, one he'd warned Vasili about:

Thicker ice meant slower speed and thus more time for the ice to form in the waters ahead of them.

He switched on the overhead lights, but the fog swallowed the beams and reflected the energy back, blinding him. He shut them off.

"We need a spotter," he said.

Before he could call the crew, the boat slammed something head-on. The nose of the boat pitched upward and their momentum died, as if they'd run aground.

Petrov cut the throttle.

In utter silence he waited. Finally the boat began to move, sliding backward a foot at a time and then settling once again. He breathed a sigh of relief. But he dared not touch the throttles.

"We cannot stop here," Vasili said.

A crewman popped his head into the control room from the lower deck. "We're leaking, Captain," the man said. "Starboard, forward."

"How bad?" Petrov asked him.

"I think I can seal it," the crewman said. "But we don't want any more of that."

"Wake the others," Petrov said. "Get them into their survival suits. Then do what you can."

It was a precaution only, and also a bluff meant to calm the fears of the men. But even in their suits, they would not last long in the water.

He turned to Vasili. "Give me your key."

"I don't think so," the broker replied.

"So you will take him, then?" Petrov asked. "If we have to leave the ship?"

Vasili hesitated, then reached under his sweater and pulled out a key that dangled around his neck.

Petrov snatched it and then pushed his way outside.

The fog hung in the air, cutting at his face like shards of suspended glass. Not a breath of wind could be felt, and with the engines shut down the silence was complete.

He looked around. A thick layer of frost covered the deck while daggers of ice hung from the bridge and the ladder and the rail. Every surface, every line, every inch of the vessel had become encrusted in ice.

The ship looked dead already.

Vasili came out a moment later, bundled from head to toe, but still too stupid to put his survival suit on. "Why did you stop?"

"So we don't rip the boat apart."

"But we can't stay here," Vasili replied.

Of course they couldn't, but they could no longer risk moving in the dark. The fog made it impossible to see the danger, and impatience would destroy them. But to some extent they seemed to be in luck. The fog was beginning to lift. In addition, the thin light of the approaching dawn had begun to illuminate things. This far north, the sun would never get off the horizon, but the light would grow quickly. Petrov hoped it would show them a way out.

And yet, even then something seemed wrong. The sky was darkest ahead of him. It should have been just the opposite; the brighter light should have been out in front of them. It had to be some illusion of the fog, but it seemed as if the sun were coming up in the wrong place.

Before he could come to terms with this, something heavy bumped the boat and pushed it to the side.

"What was that?" Vasili asked.

The slight impact could have been an iceberg moving on the current. But as he looked over the side, Petrov saw that the waters remained dead calm; the ice wasn't moving.

"Alexander," Vasili said.

Petrov ignored him and moved toward the bow. The fog had thinned considerably. Replacing it was a sight Petrov could hardly fathom: a field of solid white. Unbroken ice that stretched to the horizon in every direction.

"My God," he whispered.

The ice was clearly impenetrable, but the truth was more damning than that. The sun had finally begun to peek its face over the horizon, not ahead of them and to the left as it should have been, but behind them and to the right.

Even Vasili realized the mistake.

"You've taken us the wrong way," he shouted. "We've been sailing to the north all night!"

Petrov reeled from the error. Relying on a magnetic compass was tricky around the poles, but he was no amateur. And yet somehow they'd spent hours tracking toward the danger, into the thickening ice pack instead of away from it.

"How could this ... ," he began.

"You goddamned fool," Vasili cursed him. "You've driven us to hell."

Petrov's legs almost buckled from the realization, but urgency pushed him on. He glanced toward the stern. The ice there had not yet formed into a solid block. If they moved quickly they might just survive.

He brushed past Vasili, driving for the pilothouse. Before he could open the door, something slammed into the boat again, but this time the blow was sharp, a solid impact, rolling the boat ten degrees or more.

He shouted to his crew. "Reverse, reverse! Get us the hell out of here."

The engines rumbled beneath the deck and *Star* began to back up, but another impact shoved the bow to the right, crashing it into the ice floe.

Yanking the door open, Petrov went for the wheel and pushed a crewman aside. His hand found the throttles and moved the engines from a quarter astern to half.

"Something hit us!" the crewman shouted.

"Ice, moving on the currents," Petrov said, strangely certain that he was wrong.

The impact had been powerful, deliberate, more like an intentional ramming. He began to think about the orcas

and the sharks.

Vasili stumbled back inside the bridge. "It could have been a submarine," he said. "Remember the FSB."

Petrov thought of their cargo and the importance it was deemed to hold. Agents of the FSB, the Russian successor to the old KGB, had hunted them for weeks, trailing them across much of Siberian Russia. No doubt they were still looking, but a submarine, a ramming? Perhaps it made sense; certainly they would not risk destroying the vessel with a torpedo.

He spun the wheel, bringing the nose of the vessel around. After swinging through ninety degrees, he shoved the throttles forward. The boat began accelerating, bulling its way through the ice, pushing toward gaps of black sea, spots of open water where he could make better time.

If they could just ...

Another impact caught the boat, jarring it to the right, lifting the bow and then dropping it. The hull couldn't take much more.

Petrov gunned the throttles, grinding the metal hull and risking the props.

"Captain, you have to slow down," the crewman said.

"One mile!" he shouted back. "Then we'll slow."

But even before he finished the words, a crushing impact hit on the port side. An alarm began ringing as water flooded in.

"Get everyone topside!" Petrov yelled.

The crewman shouted something back to him, but the alarm drowned it out.

"Maybe we should make a distress call," Vasili said.

Petrov glanced at him. "Too late now."

A voice shouted from the deck. "*Akula!*"

It was the Russian word for shark. Petrov glanced out the window and saw a dark shape slicing through the black water toward them. It hit them below the waterline and Petrov was thrown to the floor by the impact.

Another blow followed, stronger and heavier, multiple thuds, like fists pounding on a door. The sharks were slamming themselves into the hull, ramming it like living torpedoes, hitting the boat with such force that they had to be injuring themselves.

"What the hell is happening?" Vasili yelled.

Petrov could not fathom it. He had never heard of such a thing. It was as if some sort of madness had infected them.

He glanced to starboard. They were about to hit the ice.

"Hold on!"

The ship slammed into the ice shelf, then recoiled from the impact. It rocked wickedly in one direction and then back in the other. For a brief instant it rolled to a level beam before beginning to list.

"Abandon ship!" Petrov shouted. "Abandon ship!"

The order was unnecessary. The men were already near the stern, readying the lifeboat. He counted five men there. Only Vasili and the crewman beside him were missing. And their passenger.

"Go!" he shouted. "Go now!"

As they pushed through the hatch, Petrov charged below deck.

Dropping into the swirling water, his feet went instantly numb. He waded to a closed cabin door and pulled the key he'd taken from Vasili. He unlocked the door and forced it open.

Inside, sitting cross-legged on a bunk, was a twelve-year-old-boy with a round face and dark hair. His features were indistinct. He could have been European, or Russian, or Asian.

"Yuri!" Petrov shouted. "Come to me!"

The boy ignored him, chanting and rocking back and forth.

Petrov charged forward, lunging and grabbing the child off the bunk. He slung him over his shoulder in a fireman's

carry and then turned toward the door, just as another impact rocked the boat.

The *Star* groaned as it took on water. Petrov braced himself against the wall that now leaned at a twenty-degree angle. Regaining his balance, he fought his way out into the hall.

With Yuri clinging to his neck, Petrov fought against the rushing water and made it to the stairs. He clambered onto them, dragging himself and the child upward, pushing through the hatch as the boat passed thirty degrees. She would roll over at any second.

He looked to the rear deck. The survival boat was gone, floating thirty yards from the foundering stern. But something was wrong. The men were in a panic, looking around, pointing to something.

A shape erupted underneath them, a huge gray body with a triangular dorsal fin. The life raft flipped, sending the men flying into the sea. Dark tails slashed between the sheets of ice, cutting the surface like knives. Petrov heard the horrible sound of his men screaming.

Akula, murdering his crew. He had never heard of such a thing.

The *Star* tilted farther and items came pouring out of open cabinets. He pulled himself through the doorway and stood on what had been the bridge's side wall. It began dropping away beneath his feet. The ship was rolling. A rush of air came up through the water.

He jumped.

Landing hard on the pack ice, he tumbled. Yuri was flung free of his grasp, sliding and sprawling on the ice.

A thunderous crash erupted behind him and Petrov turned to see his boat plunging toward the depths of the sea. Pockets of air exploded as the vessel went down; concussions echoed through the frigid air and waves of debris came rushing to the surface.

And then it was quiet.

Roiling black water, floating wreckage, and small chunks of ice swirled where the ship had been, but the noise of the struggle had ceased.

He looked to the south. The survival boat was gone and the only sign of the crew was a pair of empty life-jackets. In places he saw the sharks crossing back and forth, searching for anything they might have missed. Only he and Yuri remained.

Somehow they had landed on the edge of the ice pack. Three feet thick and as hard as concrete, it might as well have been solid ground.

He turned to look at the boy.

Their cargo, paid for at a cost of ten million dollars, with the lives of his crew taken for interest. Did he even know what he was? What he could do? Did it even matter anymore?

Already shivering, Petrov stood. He raised his eyes to what lay beyond them: a shelf of brilliant white, the barren wasteland of the ice pack, floating on the salt water of the sea. It was a continent in all but name, with only two citizens to inhabit it. And in all likelihood, they would be dead before the sun rose again.

CHAPTER 1

Southern Mexico, December 2012

DANIELLE LAIDLAW SCRAMBLED up the side of Mount Pulimundo, sliding on the loose shale and grabbing for purchase with her hands as much as her feet. The frenetic pace of the ascent combined with the thin mountain air had her legs aching and her lungs burning. But she could not afford to slow down.

Thirty-four years old, attractive, and athletic, Danielle was a member of the National Research Institute, a strange hybrid of an organization, often considered a science-based version of the CIA. That they were currently searching for the truth behind an ancient Mayan legend seemed odd, but they had their reasons. The fact that another armed group was trying to stop them told Danielle that those reasons had leaked.

She glanced back to one of the men climbing with her. Thirty feet downslope, Professor Michael McCarter struggled. "Come on, Professor," she urged. "They're getting closer."

Breathing heavily, he looked up at her. Imminent exhaustion seemed to prevent a reply, but he pushed forward with renewed determination.

She turned to their guide, a twenty-year-old Chiapas Indian named Oco. "How much farther?"

"We must get over the top," he told her, in heavily accented English. "It is on the other side."

A few minutes later they crested the summit. McCarter fell to his hands and knees, and Danielle pulled a pair of binoculars from her pack.

They stood on the rim of a volcanic crater. A thousand feet below lay a mountain lake with a small, cone-shaped island bursting upward at its center. The island's steep sides were thickly wooded but unable to disguise its volcanic nature. Yellowish fog clung to it, drifting downwind from vents and cracks.

"Is this it?"

Oco nodded. "*Isla Cubierta*," he said. Island of the Shroud.

Danielle studied it through the binoculars. If Oco was right, this place would be the key to finding what they were searching for: a Mayan site that legends referred to as the Mirror, a reference to Tohil, the Mayan god of fire, who wore an obsidian mirror on his forehead. It was a symbol of power and might, and if Danielle, McCarter, and the NRI were correct, a symbol of far more than that. But so far the Mirror had remained hidden. To find it they needed help, help that supposedly existed on the Island of the Shroud.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"The statue is there," he insisted. "I saw it once. When I came with the shaman. He told me that the time was coming, the time when all things would change."

Danielle scanned the terrain. To reach the lake required a hazardous descent, down a steep embankment of loose and crumbling shale on the caldera's inner cone. It would be rough, but much easier physically than the climb they'd just completed.

She tied her hair into a ponytail to let the breeze cool her neck, then settled her eyes on McCarter. He'd managed a sitting position now, though his chest still heaved and fell. His loose linen shirt was open; the T-shirt he wore underneath was drenched in perspiration. Sweat poured

down his face, leaving brackish, salty trails on his dark skin.

McCarter was in good shape for a sixty-year-old university professor. And they'd brought only small packs and limited supplies, having discarded all else in the name of speed. But three days of constant hiking and climbing had taken its toll.

"Ready?" she asked.

He looked up, clearly in a state of unreadiness.

"It's all downhill from here," she promised.

"I've been hearing that load of tripe since I turned forty," he said, between breaths. "And so far nothing has gotten any easier." He waved her on. "Go. I'll try to catch up."

McCarter and Danielle were an unlikely team, but they'd formed a bond two years earlier, when Danielle had recruited him for an expedition to the Amazon. Things had started well enough, but in the depths of the jungle everything had gone horribly wrong. By the thinnest of margins, the two of them and a very few others had survived.

In the aftermath of that mission, Danielle had quit the NRI and McCarter had gone back to New York to teach. At the time, he had seemed far more likely to sue the organization than to ever work for it again, but in answering to his own curiosity he'd agreed to do just that. Despite her own reasons not to, Danielle had rejoined as well, in hopes of protecting him. The way she figured it, she owed him that much. He would never have heard of the NRI if she hadn't recruited him. After eight months in the field and several close calls, including a car bomb and two shootings, she wasn't about to leave him now.

Besides, her only chance of returning to Washington, D.C., and the semblance of a normal life she'd been building was to finish this job and deposit McCarter safely back in New York.

"We stick together," she said. "Besides, you're the expert here. You're the one who needs to see this. All we have to do is get down there before them, learn what we need to know, and follow the lake out."

"And what happens when they catch us?"

"They want the statue. They're not going to chase us."

She extended a hand, which McCarter eyed suspiciously before reaching out and grasping.

She helped him to his feet and the three of them went over the side, skidding and sliding and running where they could. As they reached the bottom, she could hear shouting far up above. Their pursuers had come to the crest.

"Hurry," she said, racing across the last ten yards of solid ground and diving into the cold mountain lake.

When they were halfway across, gunfire began cracking from the ridge. Shots clipped the water around them and she dove under the surface and kept kicking until she could no longer hold her breath.

She came up shrouded in the sulfurous mist. McCarter and Oco surfaced beside her.

The gunfire had ceased but another sound caught her attention: a distant rhythmic thumping reaching out across the mountains. It was the staccato clatter of helicopter blades, somewhere to the east. Apparently their enemies had a new trick in store.

"Where is it?" she asked Oco.

He pointed toward the summit. "At the top," he said. "Hidden in the trees."

They climbed the steep angle of the island's slope, using the trees as handholds. They found the statue at the dead center. A great block of stone with the outline of a man carved into it, a Mayan king in full regalia. In his right hand he carried what looked like a net holding four stones. In his left was an orb of some kind. Hieroglyphic writing was scrawled across the bottom and a great snake twisted

across the top, with its large open mouth stretching down as if to devour the king with a single bite.

"Ahau Balam," McCarter said, reading the title glyphs. "The Jaguar King. Spirit guide of the Brotherhood."

Oco, who was of Mayan descent, fell silent in awe. McCarter did likewise.

Danielle was more concerned with the danger closing in on them. From the sound she guessed that the helicopter was no more than three minutes away and that the men behind them had to be scrambling down the cliff by now.

"We need to get this information and disappear," she said. "What do you see?"

McCarter studied the writing, eyes darting here and there. He touched one glyph and then another. He seemed confused.

"Professor?"

"I'm not sure," he said.

The sound of the helicopter lumbered closer, growing into a baritone roar.

"We have two minutes," she said. "Maybe less."

He shook his head in disbelief. "There's no story here. No explanation. It's mostly just numbers."

"Dates?"

"No. Just random numbers."

Her mind reeled. She couldn't believe what he was saying.

"Maybe if I—"

She cut him off. "No time."

She pulled out her camera, snapped off a shot, and then checked the screen. The stone was so weathered that the glyphs didn't come out clearly. She took another from a different angle, with a similar result. There just wasn't enough definition.

The helicopter was closing in. She could hear the men on foot shouting as they came down the caldera's embankment.

"It's not clear enough," she said.

McCarter stared at her for a second and then tore off his shirt, dropped to the base of the statue, and pressed it up against the raised hieroglyphs. Holding it there with one hand, he began rubbing fistfuls of the volcanic soil against the surface of the shirt. Oco helped him.

The helicopter thundered by overhead. Slowing and turning. *Looking for a place to land.* She thanked the heavens that there wasn't one to be found.

She dropped down beside him to help. The shapes of the carving began to emerge, the edges and the details. It looked like a blurry charcoal drawing, but it was working.

As they worked, pine needles, leaves, and chaff began to swirl around them. The helicopter was moving in above, its downwash blasting everything about.

"That's it," she said. "No more time."

McCarter rolled up the shirt and tucked it into his backpack while Danielle grabbed a large stone and began smashing the surface of the statue. The glyphs of the priceless work crumbled under the blows, shards flying like sparks from a grinding wheel.

Suddenly, weighted ropes dropped through the trees, unfurling like snakes.

"Run!" she shouted.

McCarter and Oco took off. Men clad in midnight blue slid down the ropes, crashing through the trees.

Danielle wheeled around, pulling out a Glock 9mm pistol. Before she could fire, two metal prongs hit her in the back, penetrating her shirt. A shock racked her body. She fell forward unable to move or even shout, crashing hard like a sack of flour and convulsing from the Taser.

Lying on her side, she saw Oco go over the edge and McCarter running after him, wires from the Taser darts trailing after him. He managed to dodge them, then lurched suddenly at the hammering of a submachine gun. A